MYTHAGO WOOD by Robert Holdstock

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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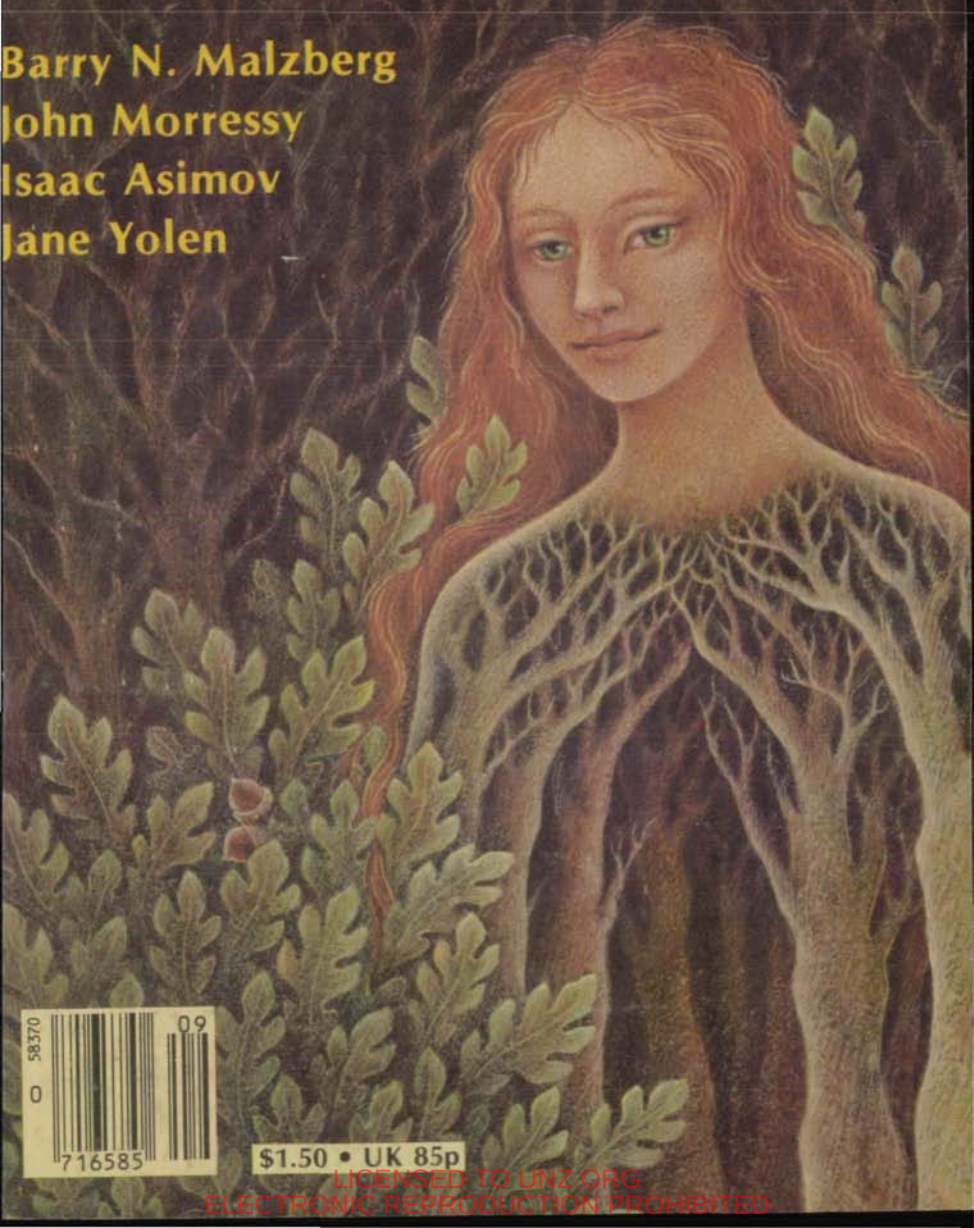

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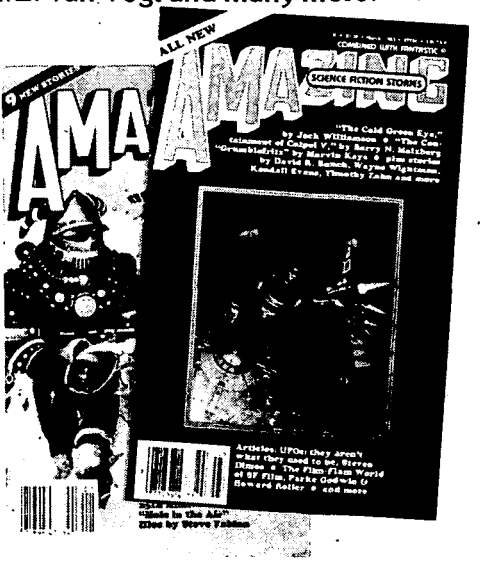

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Here is an elegant and gripping fantasy about the secret of a primary oak woodland in England. Its author is 32 years old and writes: "have been free-lancing since I quit medical research in 1975. Although I've settled with my wife (Sheila) in Hertfordshire, I'm a man of Kent, from the area known as Romney Marsh; the woodland and mill-pond in "Mythago Wood" exist, in smaller form, a half mile or so from my grandmother's house in Tenterden, and it was the sudden vivid recollection of exploring the place with my brother that was the genesis of the story." Mr. Holdstock has had three novels published in the U.S., and his latest, WHERE THE TIME WINDS BLOW, is forthcoming from Pocket Books.

Mythago Wood

When, in 1944, I was called away to the war, I felt so resentful of my father's barely expressed disappointment that, on the eve of my departure, I walked quietly to his desk and tore a page out of his notebook, the diary in which his silent, obsessive work was recorded. The fragment was dated simply "August 34," and I read it many times, appalled at its incomprehensibility, but content that I had stolen at least a tiny part of his life with which to support myself through those painful, lonely times.

Following a short and very bitter comment on the distractions in his life — the running of Oak Lodge, our family home, the demands of his two sons and of his wife (by then, I remember, desperately ill and close to the end of her life) — was a passage quite memorable for its incoherence:

"A letter from Watkins — agrees with me that at certain times of the year the aura around the woodland could reach as far as the house. Must think through the implications of this. He is keen to know the power of the oak vortex that I have measured. What to tell him? Certainly not of the first mythago. Have noticed too that the enrichment of the pre-mythago zone is more persistent, but concomitant with this, am distinctly losing my sense of time."

I treasured this piece of paper for

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BY
ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

many reasons, for the moment or two of my father's passionate interest that it represented — and for the way it locked me out of its understanding, as he had locked me out at home. Everything he loved, everything I hated.

I was wounded in early 1945 and in a military hospital met a young Frenchman and became close friends with him. I managed to avoid evacuation to England, and when the war finished I stayed in France, traveling south to convalesce in the hills behind Marseilles; it was a hot, dry place, very still, very slow; I lived with my young friend's parents and quickly became part of the tiny community.

Letters from my brother Christian, who had returned to Oak Lodge after the war, arrived every month throughout the long year of 1946. They were chatty, informative letters, but there was an increasing note of tension in them, and it was clear that Christian's relationship with his father was deteriorating rapidly. I never heard a word from the old man himself, but then I never expected to; I had long since resigned myself to the fact that, even at best, he regarded me with total indifference. All his family had been an intrusion in his work, and his guilt at neglecting us, and especially at driving his wife to taking her own life, had blossomed rapidly, during the early years of the war, into an hysterical madness that could be truly frightening. Which is not to say that he was perpetually shouting; on the contrary, most of his life was spent in silent, absorbed contemplation of the oak woodland that bordered our home. At first infuriating, because of the distance it put between him and his family, soon those long periods of quiet became blessed, earnestly welcomed.

He died in November, 1946, of the illness that had afflicted him for years. When I heard the news I was torn between my unwillingness to return to Oak Lodge, at the edge of the Knaresthorpe estate in Herefordshire, and Christian's obvious distress. He was alone, now, in the house where we had lived through our childhood together; I could imagine him prowling through the empty rooms, perhaps sitting in fa-

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ther's dank and unwholesome study and remembering the hours of denial, the smell of wood and compost that the old man had trudged in through the glass-paneled doors after his week-long sorties into the deep woodlands. The forest had spread into that room as if my father could not bear to be away from the rank undergrowth and cool, moist oak glades even when making token acknowledgement of his family. He made that acknowledgement in the only way he knew: by telling us — and mainly telling my brother — stories of the ancient forestlands beyond the house, the primary woodland of oak and ash in whose dark interior (he once said) wild boar could still be heard and smelled and tracked by their spoor.

I doubt if he had ever seen such a creature, but I vividly recalled (in that evening as I sat in my room, overlooking the tiny village in the hills, Christian's letter a crushed ball still held in my hand) how I had listened to the muffled grunting of some woodland animal and heard the heavy, unhurried crashing of something bulky moving inwards, to the winding pathway that we called Deep Track, a route that led spirally towards the very heartwoods of the forest.

I knew I would have to go home, and yet I delayed my departure for nearly another year. During that time Christian's letters ceased abruptly. In his last letter, dated April 10th, he wrote of Guiwenneth, of his unusual marriage, and hinted that I would be surprised by the lovely girl to whom he had lost his "heart, mind, soul, reason, cooking ability and just about everything else, old boy." I wrote to congratulate him, of course, but there was no further communication between us for months.

Eventually I wrote to say I was coming home, that I would stay at Oak Lodge for a few weeks and then find accommodation in one of the nearby towns. I said goodbye to France, and to the community that had become so much a part of my life, and traveled to England by bus and train, by ferry, and then by train again. And on August 20th, hardly able to believe what was happening to me, I arrived by pony and trap at the disused railway line that skirted the edge of the extensive Knaresthorpe estate. Oak Lodge lay on the far side of the grounds, four miles further round the road but accessible via the right of way through the estate's fields and woodlands. I intended to take an intermediate route, and so, lugging my single, crammed suitcase as best I could, I began to walk along the grass-covered railway track, peering, on occasion, over the high red-brick wall that marked the limit of the estate, trying to see through the gloom of the pungent pine woods. Soon this woodland, and the wall, vanished, and the land opened into tight, tree-bordered fields, to which I gained access across a rickety wooden stile, almost lost beneath briar and full-fruited blackberry bushes. I had to trample my way out of

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the public domain and so onto the south trackway that wound, skirting patchy woodland and the stream called "sticklebrook," up to the ivy-covered house that was my home.

It was late morning and very hot as I came in distant sight of Oak Lodge. Somewhere off to my left I could hear the drone of a tractor. I thought of old Alphonse Jeffries, the estate's farm supervisor, and with memory of his weather-tanned, smiling face came images of the millpond and fishing for pike from his tiny rowboat.

Memory of the millpond was as tranquil as its surface, and I moved away from the south track, through waist-high nettles and a tangle of ash and hawthorn scrub until I came out close to the bank of the wide, shadowy pool, its full size hidden by the gloom of the dense stand of oak woodland that began on its far side. Almost hidden among the rushes that crowded the nearer edge of the pond was the shallow boat from which we had fished, years before; its white paint was flaked away almost entirely now, and although the craft looked watertight, I doubted if it would take the weight of a full-grown man. I didn't disturb it but walked around the bank and sat down on the rough concrete steps of the crumbling boathouse; from here I watched the surface of the pool rippling with the darting motions of insects and the occasional passage of a fish, just below.

"A couple of sticks and a bit of string ... that's all it takes."

Christian's voice startled me. He must have walked along a beaten track from the lodge, hidden from my view by the shed. Delighted, I jumped to my feet and turned to face him. The shock of his appearance was like a physical blow to me, and I think he noticed the fact, even though I threw my arms about him and gave him a powerful brotherly bear hug.

"I had to see this place again," I said.

"I know what you mean," he said, as we broke our embrace. "I often walk here myself." There was a moment's awkward silence as we stared at each other. I felt, distinctly, that he was not particularly pleased to see me. "You're looking brown and drawn, old boy," he said. "Healthy and ill together...."

"Mediterranean sun, grape picking, and shrapnel. I'm still not one hundred percent." I smiled. "But it *is* good to be back, to see you again."

"Yes," he said dully. "I'm glad you've come, Steve. Very glad. Really. I'm afraid the place ... well, a bit of a mess. I only got your letter yesterday and I haven't had a chance to do anything. Things have changed quite a bit, you'll find."

And he more than anything. I could hardly believe that this was the chipper, perky young man who had left with his army unit in 1944. He had aged incredibly, his hair quite streaked with grey, more noticeable for his having allowed it to grow long and untidy

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at the back and sides. He reminded me very much of father, the same distant, distracted look, the same hollow cheeks and deeply wrinkled face. But it was his whole demeanor that had shocked me. He had always been a stocky, muscular chap; now he was like the proverbial scarecrow, wiry, ungainly, on edge all the time. His eyes darted about but never seemed to focus upon me. And he smelled. Of mothballs, as if the crisp white shirt and grey flannels that he wore had been dragged out of storage; and another smell beyond the naptha ... the hint of woodland and grass. There was dirt under his fingernails and in his hair, and his teeth were yellowing.

He seemed to relax slightly as the minutes ticked by. We sparred a bit, laughed a bit, and walked around the pond, whacking at the rushes with sticks. I could not shake off the feeling that I had arrived home at a bad time.

"Was it difficult ... with the old man, I mean? The last days."

He shook his head. "There was a nurse here for the final two weeks or so. I can't exactly say that he went peacefully, but she managed to stop him damaging himself ... or me, for that matter."

"Your letters certainly suggested a growing hostility. To understate the case."

Christian smiled quite grimly and glanced at me with a curious expression, somewhere between agreement and suspicion. "You got that from my letters, did you? Well, yes. He became quite crazed soon after I came back from the war. You should have seen the place, Steve. You should have seen him. I don't think he'd washed for months. I wondered what he'd been eating ... certainly nothing as simple as eggs and meat. In all honesty I think, for a few months at any rate, he'd been eating wood and leaves. He was in a wretched state. Although he let me help him with his work, he quickly began to resent me. He tried to kill me on several occasions, Steve. And I mean that, really desperate attempts on my life. There was a reason for it, I suppose...."

I was astonished by what Christian was telling me. The image of my father had changed from that of a cold, resentful man into a crazed figure, ranting at Christian and beating at him with his fists.

"I always thought that, for you at least, he had a touch of affection; he always told *you* the stories of the wood; I listened, but it was you who sat on his knee. Why would he try to kill you?"

"I became too involved," was all Christian said. He was keeping something back, something of critical importance. I could tell from his tone, from his sullen, almost resentful expression. I had never before felt so distant from my own brother. I wondered if his behavior was having an affect on Guiwenneth, the girl he had married. I wondered what sort of atmosphere she

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was living in up at Oak Lodge.

Tentatively, I broached the subject of the girl.

Christian struck angrily at the rushes by the pond. "Guiwenneth's gone," he said simply, and I stopped, startled.

"What does that mean, Chris? Gone where?"

"She's just gone, Steve," he snapped, angry and cornered. "She was father's girl, and she's gone, and that's all there is to it."

"I don't understand what you mean. Where's she gone *to*? In your letter you sounded so happy...."

"I shouldn't have written about her. That was a mistake. Now let it drop, will you?"

After that outburst, my unease with Christian grew stronger by the minute. There was something very wrong with him indeed, and clearly Guiwenneth's leaving had contributed greatly to the terrible change I could see; but I sensed there was something more. Unless he spoke about it, however, there was no way through to him. I could find only the words, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

We walked on, almost to the woods, where the ground became marshy and unsafe for a few yards before vanishing into a musty deepness of stone and root and rotting wood. It was cool, here, the sun being behind us now and beyond the thickly foliaged trees. The dense stands of rush moved in the breeze, and I watched the rotting boat as it shifted slightly on its mooring.

Christian followed my gaze, but he was not looking at the boat or the pond; he was lost, somewhere in his own thoughts. For a brief moment I experienced a jarring sadness at the sight of so fine a young man so ruined in appearance and attitude. I wanted desperately to touch his arm, to hug him, and I could hardly bear the knowledge that I was afraid to do so.

Quietly, I asked him, "What on earth has happened to you, Chris? Are you ill?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then said, "I'm not ill," and struck hard at a puffball, which shattered and spread on the breeze. He looked at me, something of resignation in his haunted face. "I've been going through a few changes, that's all. I've been picking up on the old man's work. Perhaps a bit of his reclusiveness is rubbing off on me, a bit of his detachment."

"If that's true, then perhaps you should give up for a while. The old man's obsession with the oak forest eventually killed him, and from the look of you, you're going the same way."

Christian smiled thinly and chucked his reedwhacker out into the pond, where it made a dull splash and floated in a patch of scummy green algae. "It might even be worth dying to achieve what he tried to achieve ... and failed."

I didn't understand the dramatic overtone in Christian's statement. The work that had so obsessed our father

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had been concerned with mapping the woodland and searching for evidence of old forest settlements. He had clearly invented a whole new jargon for himself and effectively isolated me from any deeper understanding of his work. I said this to Christian and added, "Which is all very interesting, but hardly *that* interesting."

"He was doing much more than that, much more than just mapping. But do you remember those maps, Steve? Incredibly detailed...."

I could remember one quite clearly, the largest map, showing carefully marked trackways and easy routes through the tangle of trees and stony outcrops; it showed clearings drawn with almost obsessive precision, each glade numbered and identified, and the whole forest divided into zones and given names. We had made a camp in one of the clearings close to the woodland edge. "We often tried to get deeper into the heartwoods, remember those expeditions, Chris? But the deep track just ends, and we always managed to get lost, I seem to recall, and very scared."

"That's true," Christian said quietly, looking at me quizzically, and added, "What if I told you the forest had *stopped* us entering? Would you believe me?"

I peered into the tangle of brush, tree and gloom, to where there was a sunlit clearing visible. "In a way I suppose it did," I said. "It stopped us penetrating very deeply because it made us scared, because there are few trackways through and the ground is choked with stone and briar ... very difficult walking. Is that what you meant? Or did you mean something a little more sinister?"

"Sinister isn't the word I'd use," said Christian, but added nothing more for moment; he reached up to pluck a leaf from a small immature oak and rubbed it between thumb and forefinger before crushing it in his palm. All the time he stared into the deep woods. "This is primary oak woodland, Steve, untouched forest from when all of the country was covered with deciduous forests of oak and ash and elder and rowan and hawthorn...."

"And all the rest," I said with a smile. "I remember the old man listing them for us."

"That's right, he did. And there's more than eight square miles of such forest stretching from here to well beyond Grimley, eight square miles of original, post-Ice Age forestland. Untouched, uninvaded for thousands of years." He broke off and looked at me hard, before adding, "Resistant to change."

I said, "He always thought there were boars alive in there. I remember hearing something one night, and he convinced me that it was a great big old bull boar, skirting the edge of the woods, looking for a mate."

Christian led the way back towards the boathouse. "He was probably right. If boars *had* survived from medi-

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eval times, this is just the sort of woodland they'd be found in."

With my mind opened to those events of years ago, memory inched back, images of childhood — the burning touch of sun on bramble-grazed skin, fishing trips to the millpond, tree camps, games, explorations ... and instantly I recalled the Twigling.

As we walked back to the beaten pathway that led up to the lodge, we discussed the sighting. I had been about nine or ten years old. On our way to the sticklebrook to fish we had decided to test out our stick and string rods on the millpond, in the vain hope of snaring one of the predatory fish that lived there. As we crouched by the water (we only ever dared go out in the boat with Alphonse), we saw movement in the trees, across on the other bank. It was a bewildering vision that held us enthralled for the next few moments, and not a little terrified: standing watching us was a man in brown leathery clothes, with a wide, gleaming belt around his waist, and a spiky orange beard that reached to his chest; on his head he wore twigs, held to his crown by the leather band. He watched us for a moment only, before slipping back into the darkness. We heard nothing in all this time, no sound of approach, no sound of departure.

Running back to the house, we had soon calmed down. Christian decided, eventually, that it must have been old Alphonse, playing tricks on us. But when I mentioned what we'd seen to my father, he reacted almost angrily (although Christian recalls him as having been excited, and bellowing for that reason, and not because he was angry with our having been near the forbidden pool). It was father who referred to the vision as "the Twigling," and soon after we had spoken to him he vanished into the woodland for nearly two weeks.

"That was when he came back hurt, remember?" We had reached the grounds of Oak Lodge, and Christian held the gate open for me as he spoke.

"The arrow wound. The gypsy arrow. My God, that was a bad day."

"The first of many."

I noticed that most of the ivy had been cleared from the walls of the house; it was a grey place now, small, curtainless windows set in the dark brick, the slate roof, with its three tall chimney stacks, partially hidden behind the branches of a big old beech tree. The yard and gardens were untidy and unkempt, the empty chicken coops and animal shelters ramshackle and decaying. Christian had really let the place slip. But when I stepped across the threshold, it was as if I had never been away. The house smelled of stale food and chlorine, and I could almost see the thin figure of my mother, working away at the immense pinewood table in the kitchen, cats stretched out around her on the red-brick floor.

Christian had grown tense again, staring at me in that fidgety way that

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marked his unease. I imagined he was still unsure whether to be glad or angry that I had come home like this. For a moment I felt like an intruder. He said. "Why don't you unpack and freshen up. You can use your old room. It's a bit stuffy, I expect, but it'll soon air. Then come down and we'll have some late lunch. We've got all the time in the world to chat, as long as we're finished by tea." He smiled, and I thought this was some slight attempt at humor. But he went on quickly, staring at me in a cold, hard way, "Because if you're going to stay at home for a while, then you'd better know what's going on here. I don't want you interfering with it, Steve, or with what I'm doing."

"I wouldn't interfere with your life, Chris—"

"Wouldn't you? We'll see. I'm not going to deny that I'm nervous of you being here. But since you are...." he trailed off, and for a second looked almost embarrassed. "Well, we'll have a chat later on."

Intrigued by what Christian had said, and worried by his apprehension of me, I nonetheless restrained my curiosity and spent an hour exploring the house again, from top to bottom, inside and out, everywhere save father's study, the contemplation of which chilled me more than Christian's behavior had done. Nothing had changed, except that it was untidy and untenanted. Christian had employed a part-time cleaner and cook, a good soul from a nearby village who cycled to the Lodge every week and prepared a pie or stew that would last the man three days. Christian did not go short of farm produce, so much so that he rarely bothered to use his ration book. He seemed to get all he needed, including sugar and tea, from the Knaresthorpe estate, which had always been good to my family.

My own room was dust free but quite stale. I opened the window wide and lay down on the bed for a few minutes, staring out and up into the hazy late-summer sky, past the waving branches of the gigantic beech that grew so close to the lodge. Several times, in the years before my teens, I had climbed from window to tree and made a secret camp among the thick branches; by moonlight I had shivered in my underpants, crouched in that private place, imagining the dark doings of night creatures below.

Lunch, in midafternoon, was a substantial feast of cold pork, chicken and hard-boiled eggs, in quantities that, after two years in France on strict rations, I had never thought to see again. We were , of course, eating his food supply for several days, but the fact seemed irrelevant to Christian, who at any rate only picked at his meal.

Afterwards we talked for a couple of hours, and Christian relaxed quite noticeably, although he never referred to Guiwenneth or to father's work, and I never broached either subject.

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We were sprawled in the uncomfortable armchairs that had belonged to my grandparents, surrounded by the time-faded mementos of our family ... photographs, a noisy rose-wood clock, horrible pictures of exotic Spain, all framed in cracked mock-gilded wood, and all pressed hard against the same floral wallpaper that had hugged the walls of the sitting room since a time before my birth. But it was home, and Christian was home, and the smell, and the faded surrounds, all were home to me. I knew, within two hours of arriving, that I would have to stay. It was not so much that I belonged here — although I certainly felt that — but simply that the place belonged to me, not in any mercenary sense of ownership, more in the way that the house and the land around the house shared a common life with me; we were part of the same evolution; even in France, even as far as Greece, where I had been in action, I had not been separated from that evolution, merely stretched to an extreme.

As the heavy old rose-wood clock began to whirr and click, preceding its labored chiming of the hour of five, Christian abruptly rose from his chair and tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the empty fire grate.

"Let's go to the study," he said, and I rose without speaking and followed him through the house to the small room where our father had worked. "You're scared of this room, aren't you?" he said as he opened the door and walked inside, crossing to the heavy oak desk and pulling out a large leather-bound book from one of the drawers.

I hesitated outside the study, watching Christian, almost unable to move my legs to carry myself into the room. I recognized the book he held, my father's notebook. I touched my back pocket, the wallet I carried there, and thought of the fragment of that notebook that was hidden inside the thin leather. I wondered if anyone, my father or Christian, had ever noticed that a page was missing. Christian was watching me, his eyes bright with excitement, now, his hands trembling as he placed the book on the desk top.

"He's dead, Steve. He's gone from this room, from the house. There's no need to be afraid any more."

"Isn't there?"

But I found the sudden strength to move and stepped across the threshold. The moment I entered the musty room I felt totally subdued, deeply affected by the coolness of the place, the stark, haunted atmosphere that hugged the walls and carpets and windows. It smelled slightly of leather, here, and dust too, with just a distant hint of polish, as if Christian made a token effort to keep this stifling room clean. It was not a crowded room, not a library as my father would have perhaps liked it to be. There were books on zoology and botany, on history and archaeology, but these were not rare copies, merely the cheapest copies he could

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find at the time. There were more paperbacks than stiff-covered books, and the exquisite binding of his notes, and the deeply varnished desk, had an air of Victorian elegance about them that belied the otherwise shabby studio.

On the walls, between the cases of books, were his glass-framed specimens, pieces of wood, collections of leaves, crude sketches of animal and plant life made during the first years of his fascination with the forest. And almost hidden away among the cases and the shelves was the patterned shaft of the arrow that had struck him fifteen years before, its flights twisted and useless, the broken shaft glued together, the iron head dulled with corrosion, but a lethal-looking weapon nonetheless.

I stared at that arrow for several seconds, reliving the man's agony, and the tears that Christian and I had wept for him as we had helped him back from the woodlands, that cold autumn afternoon, convinced that he would die.

How quickly things had changed after that strange and never fully explained incident. If the arrow linked me with an earlier day, when some semblance of concern and love had remained in my father's mind, the rest of the study radiated only coldness.

I could still see the greying figure, bent over his desk, writing furiously. I could hear the troubled breathing, the lung disorder that finally killed him; I could hear his caught breath, the vocalized sound of irritation as he grew aware of my presence and waved me away with a half-irritated gesture, as if he begrudged even that split second of acknowledgement.

How like him Christian looked now, standing there all disheveled and sickly looking, and yet with the mark of absolute confidence about him, his hands in the pockets of his flannels, shoulders drooped, his whole body visibly shaking.

He had waited quietly as I adjusted to the room and let the memories and atmosphere play through me. As I stepped up to the desk, my mind back on the moment at hand, he said, "Steve, you should read the notes. They'll make a lot of things clear to you and help you understand what it is I'm doing as well."

I turned the notebook towards me, scanning the sprawling untidy handwriting, picking out words and phrases, reading through the years of my father's life in a few scant seconds. The words were as meaningless, on the whole, as those on my purloined sheet. To read them brought back a memory of anger and of danger, and of fear. The life in the notes had sustained me through nearly a year of war and had come to mean something outside of their proper context. I felt reluctant to dispel that powerful association with the past.

"I intend to read them, Chris. From beginning to end, and that's a promise. But not for the moment."

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I closed the book, noticing as I did that my hands were clammy and trembling. I was not yet ready to be so close to my father again, and Christian saw this and accepted it.

Conversation died quite early that night, as my energy expired, and the tensions of the long journey finally made themselves known to me. Christian came up with me and stood in the doorway of my room, watching as I turned back the sheets and pottered about, picking up bits and pieces of my past life, laughing, shaking my head and trying to evoke a last moment's tired nostalgia. "Remember making camp out in the beech?" I said, watching the grey of branch and leaf against the still-bright evening sky. "Yes," said Christian with a smile. "Yes, I remember very clearly."

But it was as fatigued as that, and Christian took the hint and said, "Sleep well, old chap. I'll see you in the morning."

If I slept at all, it was for the first two or three hours after putting head to pillow. I woke sharply, and brightly, in the dead of night, one or two o'clock, perhaps; the sky was very dark now, and it was quite windy outside. I lay and stared at the window, wondering how my body could feel so fresh, so alert. There was movement downstairs, and I guessed that Christian was doing some tidying, restlessly walking through the house, trying to adjust to the idea of me moving in.

The sheets smelled of mothballs and old cotton; the bed creaked in a metallic way when I shifted on it, and when I lay still, the whole room clicked and shuffled, as if adapting itself to its first company in so many years. I lay awake for ages but must have drifted to sleep again before first light, because suddenly Christian was bending over me, shaking my shoulder gently.

I started with surprise, awake at once, and propped up on my elbows, looking around. It was dawn. "What is it, Chris?"

"I've got to go, old boy. I'm sorry, but I have to."

I realized he was wearing a heavy oilskin cape and thick-soled walking boots on his feet. "Go? What d'you mean, go?"

"I'm sorry, Steve. There's nothing I can do about it." He spoke softly, as if there were someone else in the house who might be woken by raised voices. He looked more drawn than ever in this pale light, and his eyes were narrowed, I thought with pain or anxiety. "I have to go away for a few days. You'll be all right. I've left a list of instructions downstairs, where to get bread, eggs, all that sort of thing. I'm sure you'll be able to use my ration book until yours comes. I shan't be long, just a few days. That's a promise...."

He rose from his crouch and walked out the door. "For God's sake, Chris, where are you going?"

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"Inwards," was all he said, before I heard him clump heavily down the stairs. I remained motionless for a moment or two, trying to clear my thoughts, then rose, put on my dressing gown and followed him down to the kitchen. He had already left the house. I went back up to the landing window and saw him skirting the edge of the yard and walking swiftly down towards the south track. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and carrying a long black staff; on his back he had a small rucksack, slung uncomfortably over one shoulder.

"Where's inwards, Chris?" I said to his vanishing figure, and watched long after he had disappeared from view. "What's going on inside your head?" I asked of his empty bedroom as I wandered restlessly through the house; Guiwenneth, I decided in my wisdom, her loss, her leaving ... how little one could interpret from the words "she's gone." And in all our chat of the evening before he had never alluded to the girl again. I had come home to England expecting to find a cheerful young couple and instead had found a haunted, wasting brother living in the derelict shadow of our family home.

By the afternoon I had resigned myself to a period of solitary living, for wherever Christian had gone (and I had a fairly good idea), he had hinted clearly that he would be gone for some time. There was a lot to do about the house and the yard, and there seemed no better way to spend my time than in beginning to rebuild the personality of the house. I made a list of essential repairs and the following day walked into the nearest town to order what materials I could, mostly wood and paint, which I found in reasonable supply.

I renewed my acquaintance with the Knaresthorpe family and with many of the local families with whom I had once been friendly. I terminated the services of the part-time cook; I could look after myself quite well enough. And I visited the cemetery, a single, brief visit, coldly accomplished.

The month of August turned to September, and I noticed a definite crispness in the air by evening and early in the morning. It was a season I loved, the turn from summer to autumn, although it bore with it associations of return to school after the long vacation, and that was a memory I didn't cherish. I soon grew used to being on my own in the house, and although I took long walks around the deep woodlands, watching the road and the railway track for Christian's return, I had ceased to feel anxious about him by the end of my first week home and had settled comfortably into a daily routine of building in the yard, painting the exterior woodwork of the house ready for the onslaught of winter, and digging over the large untended garden.

It was during the evening of my eleventh day at home that this domestic routine was disturbed by a circumstance of such peculiarity that after-

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wards I could not sleep for thinking about it.

I had been in the town of Hobbhurst for most of the afternoon and after a light evening meal was sitting reading the newspaper; towards nine o'clock, as I began to feel ready for an evening stroll, I thought I heard a dog, not so much barking as howling. My first thought was that Christian was coming back; my second that there were no dogs in this immediate area at all.

I went out into the yard; it was after dusk but still quite bright, although the oak woods were melded together into a grey-green blur. I called for Christian, but there was no response. I was about to return to my paper when a man stepped out of the distant woodland and began to trot towards me; on a short leather leash he was holding the most enormous hound I have ever seen.

At the gate to our private grounds he stopped, and the dog began to growl; it placed its forepaws on the fence and, in so doing, rose almost to the height of its master. I felt nervous at once, keeping my attention balanced between the gaping, panting mouth of that dark beast and the strange man who held it in check.

It was difficult to make him out clearly, for his face was painted with dark patterns and his mustaches drooped to well below his chin; his hair was plastered thickly about his scalp; he wore a dark woollen shirt, with a leather jerkin over the top, and tight, check-patterned breeches that reached to just below his knees. When he stepped cautiously through the gate, I could see his rough and ready sandals. Across his shoulder he carried a crude-looking bow, and a bundle of arrows, held together with a simple thong and tied to his belt. He, like Christian, carried a staff.

Inside the gate he hesitated, watching me. The hound was restless beside him, licking its mouth and growling softly. I had never seen a dog such as this, shaggy and dark-furred, with the narrow pointed face of an Alsatian, but the body, it seemed to me, of a bear; except that its legs were long and thin, an animal made for chasing, for hunting.

The man spoke to me, and although I felt familiar with the words, they meant nothing. I didn't know what to do. So I shook my head and said that I didn't understand. The man hesitated just a moment before repeating what he had said, this time with a distinct edge of anger in his voice. And he started to walk towards me, tugging at the hound to prevent it straining at the leash. The light was draining from the sky, and he seemed to grow in stature in the greyness as he approached. The beast watched me, hungrily.

"What do you want?" I called, and tried to sound firm when I would rather have run inside the house. The man was ten paces away from me. He stopped, spoke again and this time

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made eating motions with the hand that held his staff. *Now* I understood. I nodded vigorously. "Wait here," I said, and went back to the house to fetch the cold joint of pork that was to last me four more days. It was not large, but it seemed an hospitable thing to do. I took this, half a granary loaf, and a jug of bottled beer out into the yard. The stranger was crouched now, the hound lying down beside him, rather reluctantly, it seemed to me. As I tried to approach them, the dog roared in a way that set my heart racing and nearly made me drop my gifts. The man shouted at the beast and said something to me. I placed the food where I stood and backed away. The gruesome pair approached and again squatted down to eat.

As he picked up the joint, I saw the scars on his arm, running down and across the bunched muscles. I also smelled him, a raw, rancid odor, sweat and urine mixed with the fetid aroma of rotting meat. I nearly gagged but held my ground, watching as the stranger tore at the pork with his teeth, swallowing hard and fast. The hound watched me.

After a few minutes the man stopped eating, looked at me, and with his gaze fixed on mine, almost challenging me to react, passed the rest of the meat to the dog, which growled loudly and snapped at the joint. The hound chewed, cracked and gulped the entire piece of pork in less than four minutes, while the stranger cautiously — and without much apparent pleasure — drank beer and chewed on a large mouthful of bread.

Finally this bizarre feast was over. The man rose to his feet and jerked the hound away from where it was licking the ground noisily. He said a word I intuitively recognized as "thankyou." He was about to turn when the hound scented something; it uttered a high-pitched keen, followed by a raucous bark, and snatched itself away from its master's restraining grip, racing across the yard to a spot between the ramshackle chicken houses. Here it sniffed and scratched until its master reached it, grabbed the leather leash, and shouted angrily and lengthily at his charge. The hound moved with him, padding silently and monstrously into the gloom beyond the yard. The last I saw of them they were running at full speed, around the edge of the woodland, towards the farmlands around the village of Grimley.

In the morning the place where man and beast had rested *still* smelled rank. I skirted the area quickly as I walked to the woods and found the place where my strange visitors had exited from the trees; it was trampled and broken, and I followed the line of their passage for some yards into the shade before stopping and turning back.

Where on earth had they come from? Had the war had such an effect on men in England that some had returned to the wild, using bow and arrow and hunting dog for survival?

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Not until midday did I think to look between the chicken huts, at the ground so deeply scored by that brief moment's digging. What had the beast scented, I wondered, and a sudden chill clawed at my heart. I left the place at a run, unwilling, for the moment, to confirm my worst fears.

How I knew I cannot say; intuition, or perhaps something that my subconscious had detected in Christian's words and mannerisms the week or so before, during our brief encounter. In any event, late in the afternoon that same day I took a spade to the chicken huts and within a few minutes of digging had proved my instinct right.

It took me half an hour of sitting on the back doorstep of the house, staring across the yard at the grave, to find the courage to uncover the woman's body totally. I was dizzy, slightly sick, but most of all I was shaking; an uncontrollable, unwelcome shaking of arms and legs so pronounced that I could hardly pull on a pair of gloves. But eventually I knelt by the hole and brushed the rest of the dirt from the girl's body.

Christian had buried her three feet deep, face down; her hair was long and red; her body was still clad in a strange green garment, a patterned tunic that was laced at the sides and, though it was crushed up almost to her waist now, would have reached to her calves. A staff was buried with her. I turned the head, holding my breath against the almost intolerable smell of putrefaction, and with a little effort could gaze upon the withering face. I saw then how she had died, for the head and stump of the arrow were still embedded in her eye. Had Christian tried to withdraw the weapon and succeeded only in breaking it? There was enough of the shaft left for me to notice that it had the same carved markings as the arrow in my father's study.

Poor Guiwenneth, I thought, and let the corpse drop back to its resting place. I filled in the dirt again. When I reached the house I was cold with sweat and in no doubt that I was about to be violently sick.

Two days later, when I came down in the morning, I found the kitchen littered with Christian's clothes and effects, the floor covered with mud and leaf litter, the whole place smelling unpleasant. I crept upstairs to his room and stared at his semi-naked body; he was belly down on the bed, face turned towards me, sleeping soundly and noisily, and I imagined that he was sleeping enough for a week. The state of his body, though, gave me cause for concern. He was scratched and scarred from neck to ankle, and filthy, and malodorous to an extreme. His hair was matted with dirt. And yet, about him there was something hardened and strong, a tangible physical change from the hollow-faced, rather skeletal

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young man who had greeted me nearly two weeks before.

He slept for most of the day, emerging at six in the evening wearing a loose-fitting grey shirt and flannels, torn off just above the knee. He had half-heartedly washed his face, but still reeked of sweat and vegetation, as if he had spent the days away buried in compost.

I fed him, and he drank the entire contents of a pot of tea as I sat watching him; he kept darting glances at me, suspicious little looks as if he were nervous of some sudden move or surprise attack upon him. The muscles of his arms and wrists were pronounced. This was almost a different man.

"Where have you been, Chris?" I asked after a while, and was not at all surprised when he answered, "In the woods, old boy. Deep in the woods." He stuffed more meat into his mouth and chewed noisily. As he swallowed he found a moment to say, "I'm quite fit. Bruised and scratched by the damned brambles, but quite fit."

In the woods. Deep in the woods. What in heavens name could he have been doing there? As I watched him wolf down his food, I saw again the stranger, crouching like an animal in my yard, chewing on meat as if he were some wild beast. Christian reminded me of that man. There was the same air of the primitive about him.

"You need a bath rather badly," I said, and he grinned and made a sound of affirmation. "What have you been doing, Chris? In the woods. Have you been camping?"

He swallowed noisily and drank half a cup of tea before shaking his head. "I have a camp there, but I've been searching, walking as deep as I could get. But I still can't get beyond...." He broke off and glanced at me, a questioning look in his eyes. "Did you read the old man's notebook?"

I said that I hadn't. In truth, I had been so surprised by his abrupt departure and so committed to getting the house back into some sort of shape that I had forgotten all about father's notes on his work. And even as I said this, I wondered if the truth of the matter was that I had put father, his work and his notes, as far from my mind as possible, as if they were specters whose haunting would reduce my resolve to go forward.

Christian wiped his hand across his mouth and stared at his empty plate. He suddenly sniffed himself and laughed. "By the Gods, I do stink. You'd better boil me up some water, Steve. I'll wash right now."

But I didn't move. Instead I stared across the wooden table at him; he caught my gaze and frowned. "What is it? What's on your mind?"

"I found her, Chris. I found her body. Guiwenneth. I found where you buried her."

I don't know what reacion I expected from Christian. Anger, perhaps, or panic, or a sudden babbling burst of

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explanation. I half hoped he would react with puzzlement, that the corpse in the yard would turn out not to be the remains of his wife and that he had had no involvement with its burial. But Christian knew about the body. He stared at me blankly, and a heavy, sweaty silence made me grow uncomfortable.

Suddenly I realized that Christian was crying, his gaze unwavering from my own, but moistened, now, by the great flood of tears through the remaining grime on his face. And yet he made no sound, and his face never changed its expression from that of bland, almost blind contemplation.

"Who shot her, Chris?" I asked quietly. "Did you?"

"Not me," he said, and with the words his tears stopped, and his gaze dropped to the table. "She was shot by a mythago. There was nothing I could do about it."

Mythago? The meaning was alien to me, although I recognized the word from the scrap of my father's notebook that I carried. I queried it, and Chris rose from the table but rested his hands upon it as he watched me. "A mythago," he repeated. "It's still in the woods ... they all are. That's where I've been, seeking among them. I tried to save her, Steve. She was alive when I found her, and she might have stayed alive, but I brought her out of the woods ... in a way, I did kill her. I took her away from the vortex, and she died quite quickly. I panicked, then. I didn't know what to do. I buried her because it seemed the easiest way out...."

"Did you tell the police? Did you report her death?"

Christian grinned, but it was not with any morbid humor. It was a knowing grin, a response to some secret that he had not yet shared; and yet the grin was merely a defense, for it faded rapidly. "Not necessary Steve.... The police would not have been interested."

I rose angrily from the table. It seemed to me that Christian was behaving, and had behaved, with appalling irreseponsibility. "Her family, Chris ... her parents! They have a right to know."

And Christian laughed.

I felt the blood rise in my face. "I don't see anything to laugh at."

He sobered instantly, looked at me almost abashed. "You're right. I'm sorry. You don't understand, and it's time you did. Steve, she had no parents because she had no life, no real life. She's lived a thousand times, and she's never lived at all. But I still fell in love with her ... and I shall find her again in the woods; she's in there somewhere...."

Had he gone mad? His words were the unreasoned babblings of one insane, and yet something about his eyes, something about his demeanor, told me that it was not so much insanity as obsession. But obsession with what?

"You *must* read the old man's

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notes, Steve. Don't put it off any longer. They will tell you about the wood, about what's going on in there. I mean it. I'm neither mad nor callous. I'm just trapped, and before I go away again, I'd like you to know why, and how, and where I'm going. Perhaps you'll be able to help me. Who knows? Read the book. And then we'll talk. And when you know what our dear departed father managed to do, then I'm afraid I have to take my leave of you again."

There is one entry in my father's notebook that seems to mark a turning point in his research, and in his life. It is a longer entry than the rest of that particular time and follows an absence of seven months from the pages. While his entries are detailed, he could not be described as having been a dedicated diarist, and the style varies from clipped notes to fluent description. (I discovered, too, that he himself had torn many pages from the thick book, thus concealing my minor crime quite effectively. Christian had never noticed the missing page.) On the whole, he seems to have used the notebook and the quiet hours of recording as a way of conversing with himself — a means of clarification of his own thoughts.

The entry in question is dated September, 1933, and was written shortly after our encounter with the Twigling. After reading the entry for the first time, I thought back to that year and realized I had been just nine years old.

"Wynne-Jones arrived after dawn. Walked together along the south track, checking the flux-drains for sign of mythago activity. Back to the house quite shortly after — no one about, which suited my mood. A crisp, dry autumn day. Like last year, images of the Urscumug are strongest as the season changes. Perhaps he senses autumn, the dying of the green. He comes forward, and the oak woods whisper to him. He must be close to genesis. Wynne-Jones thinks a further time of isolation needed, and it must be done. Jennifer already concerned and distraught by my absences. I feel helpless — can't speak to her. Must do what is needed.

"Yesterday the boys glimpsed the Twigling. I had thought him resorbed — clearly the resonance stronger than we had believed. He seems to frequent woodland edge, which is to be expected. I have seen him along the track several times, but not for a year or so. The persistence is worrying. Both boys clearly disturbed by the sighting; Christian less emotional. I suspect it meant little to him, a poacher perhaps, or local man taking short cut to Grimley. Wynne-Jones suggests we go back into woods and call the Twigling deep, perhaps to the hogback glade where he might remain in strong oak-vortex and eventually fade. But I know that penetrating into deep woodland will involve more than a week's absence, and poor Jennifer already deeply depressed

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by my behavior. Cannot explain it to her, though I dearly want to. Do not want the children involved in this, and it worries me that they have now twice seen a mythago. I have invented magic forest creatures — stories for them. Hope they will associate what they see with products of their own imaginations. But must be careful. Until it is resolved, until the Urscumug mythago forms must not let any but Wynne-Jones know of what I have discovered. The completeness of the resurrection essential. The Urscumug is the most powerful because he is the primary. I know for certain that the oak woods will contain him, but others might be frightened of the power they would certainly be able to feel, and end it for everyone. Dread to think what would happen if these forests were destroyed, and yet they cannot survive forever.

"Today's training with Wynne-Jones: test pattern 26:iii, shallow hypnosis, green light environment. As the frontal bridge reached sixty volts, despite the pain the flow across my skull was the most powerful I have ever known. Am now totally convinced that each half of the brain functions in a slightly different way and that the hidden awareness is located on the right-hand side. It has been lost for so long! The Wynne-Jones bridge enables a superficial communion between the fields around each hemisphere, and the zone of the pre-mythago is excited accordingly. If only there were some way of exploring the living brain to find exactly where the site of this occult presence lies.

"The forms of the mythagos cluster in my peripheral vision, still. Why never in fore-vision? These unreal images are mere reflections, after all. The form of Hood was subtly different — more brown than green, the face less friendly, more haunted, drawn. This is certainly because earlier images (even the Hood mythago that actually formed in the woodland, two years ago) were affected by my own confused childhood images of the greenwood and the merry band. But now, evocation of the pre-mythago is more powerful, reaches to the basic form, without interference. The Arthur form was more real as well, and I glimpsed the various marshland forms from the latter part of the first millennium AD. Wynne-Jones would love me to explore these folk heroes, unrecorded and unknown, but I am anxious to find the primary image.

"The Urscumug formed in my mind in the clearest form I have ever seen him. Hints of the Twigling in form, but he is much more ancient, far bigger. Decks himself with wood and leaves, on top of animal hides. Face seems smeared with white clay, forming a mask upon the exaggerated features below; but it is hard to see the face clearly. A mask upon a mask? The hair a mass of stiff and spiky points; gnarled hawthorn branches are driven up through the matted hair, giving a most bizarre appearance. I believe he carries

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a spear, with a wide stone blade ... an angry looking weapon, but again, hard to see, always just out of focus. He is so old, this primary image, that he is fading from the human mind, and in any event is touched with confusion, the overassertion of later cultural interpretation of his appearance ... a hint of bronze particularly, mostly about the arms (torques). I suspect that the legend of the Urscumug was powerful enough to carry through all the neolithic and on into the second millennium BC, perhaps even later. Wynne-Jones thinks the Urscumug may predate even the neolithic.

"Essential, now, to spend time in the forest, to allow the vortex to interact with me and form the mythago. I intend to leave the house within the next week."

Without commenting on the strange, confusing passage that I had read, I turned the pages of the diary and read entries here and there. I could clearly recall that autumn in 1933, the time when my father had packed a large rucksack and wandered into the woods, walking swiftly away from my mother's hysterical shouting, and flanked by his diminutive scientist friend (a sour-faced man who never acknowledged anyone but my father and who seemed embarrassed to be in the house when he came to visit). Mother had not spoken for the rest of the day, and she did nothing but sit in her bedroom and occasionally weep. Christian and I had become so distraught by her behavior that in the late afternoon we had penetrated the oakwoods as deeply as we dared, calling for our father, and finally panicking at the gloomy silence and the loud, sudden sounds that disturbed it. He had returned weeks later, disheveled and stinking like a tramp. The entry in his notebook, a few days later, is a short and bitter account of failure. Nothing had happened. A single, rather rambling paragraph caught my attention.

"The mythogenetic process is not only complex, it is reluctant. My mind is not at rest and, as Wynne-Jones has explained, it is likely that my human considerations, my worries, form an effective barrier between the two mythopoetic energy flows in my cortex — the *form* from the right brain, the *reality* from the left. The pre-mythago zone is not sufficiently enriched by my own life force for it to interact in the oak vortex. I fear too that the natural disappearance of so much life from the forest is affecting the interface. The boars are there, I'm sure. But perhaps the life number is critical. I estimate no more than forty, moving within the spiral vortex bounded by the ashwood intrusions into the oak circle. There are no deer, no wolves, although the most important animal, the hare, frequents the woodland edge in profusion. But perhaps the absence of so much that had once lived here has thrown the balance of the formula. And yet, through the primary existence of these woods, life was changing. By the thirteenth

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century there was much botanical life that was alien to the 'ley matrix' in places where the mythagos still formed. The form of the myth-men changes, adapts, and it is the later forms that generate easiest. Hood is back — like all the Jack in the Greens, is a nuisance, and several times moved into the ridge zone around the hogback glade. He shot at me, and this is becoming a cause of great concern! But I cannot enrich the oak vortex sufficiently with the pre-mythago of the Urscumug. What is the answer? Perhaps the memory is too far gone, too deep in the silent zones of the brain, now, to touch the trees."

Christian saw me frown as I read through this tumble of words and images. Hood? Robin Hood? And someone — this Hood — shooting at my father in the woods? I glanced around the study and saw the iron-tipped arrow in its long, narrow glass case, mounted above the display of woodland butterflies. Christian was turning the pages of the notebook, having watched me read in silence for the better part of an hour. He was perched on the desk; I sat in father's chair.

"What's all this about, Chris? It reads as if he were actually trying to create copies of storybook heroes."

"Not copies, Steve. The real thing. There. Last bit of reading for the moment, then I'll go through it with you in layman's terms."

It was an earlier entry, not dated by year, only by day and month, although it was clearly from some years before the 1933 recording.

"I call those particular times 'cultural interfaces'; they form zones, bounded in space, of course, by the limits of the country, but bounded also in time, a few years, a decade or so, when the two cultures — that of the invaded and the invader — are in a highly anguished state. The mythagos grow from the power of hate, and fear, and form in the natural woodlands from which they can either emerge — such as the Arthur, or Artorius form, the bear-like man with his charismatic leadership — or remain in the natural landscape, establishing a hidden focus of hope — the Robin Hood form, perhaps Hereward, and of course the hero-form I call the Twigling, harassing the Romans in so many parts of the country. I imagine that it is the combined emotion of the two races that draws out the mythago, but it clearly sides with that culture whose roots are longest established in what I agree could be a sort of *ley matrix*; thus, Arthur forms and helps the Britons against the Saxons, but later Hood is created to help the Saxons against the Norman invader."

I drew back from the book, shaking my head. The expressions were confusing, bemusing. Christian grinned as he took the notebook and weighed it in his hands. "Years of his life, Steve, but his concern with keeping detailed records was not everything it might have been. He records nothing for years,

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then writes every day for a month."

"I need a drink of something. And a few definitions."

We walked from the study, Christian carrying the notebook. As we passed the framed arrow, I peered closely at it. "Is he saying that the real Robin Hood shot that into him? And killed Guiwenneth too?"

"It depends," said Christian thoughtfully, "on what you mean by real. Hood came to that oak forest and may still be there. I think he is. As you have obviously noticed, he was there four months ago when he shot Guiwenneth. But there were many Robin Hoods, and all were as real or unreal as each other, created by the Saxon peasants during their time of repression by the Norman invader."

"I don't comprehend this at all, Chris — but what's a 'ley matrix'? What's an 'oak vortex'? Does it mean anything?"

As we sipped scotch and water in the sitting room, watching the dusk draw closer, the yard beyond the window greying into a place of featureless shapes, Christian explained how a man called Alfred Watkins had visited our father on several occasions and shown him on a map of the country how straight lines connected places of spiritual or ancient power — the barrows, stones and churches of three different cultures. These lines he called leys and believed that they existed as a form of earth energy running below the ground, but influencing that which stood upon it. My father had thought about leys, and apparently tried to measure the energy in the ground below the forest, but without success. And yet he had measured *something* in the oak woods — an energy associated with all the life that grew there. He had found a spiral vortex around each tree, a sort of aura, and those spirals bounded not just trees, but whole stands of trees and glades. Over the years he had mapped the forest. Christian brought out that map of the woodland area, and I looked at it again, but from a different point of view, beginning to understand the marks made upon it by the man who had spent so much time within the territories it depicted. Circles within circles were marked, crossed and skirted by straight lines, some of which were associated with the two pathways we called south and deep track. The letters HB in the middle of the vast acreage of forest were clearly meant to refer to the "Hogback" glade that existed there, a clearing that neither Christian nor I had ever been able to find. There were zones marked out as "spiral oak," "dead ash zone" and "oscillating traverse."

"The old man believed that all life is surrounded by an energetic aura — you can see the human aura as a faint glow in certain light. In these ancient woodlands, *primary* woodlands, the combined aura forms something far more powerful, a sort of creative field that can interact with our unconscious. And it's in that unconscious that we

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carry what he calls the pre-mythago — that's *myth imago*, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature. This takes on substance in a natural environment, solid flesh, blood, clothing, and — as you saw — weaponry. The form of the idealized myth, the hero figure, alters with cultural changes, assuming the identity and technology of the time. When one culture invades another — according to father's theory — the heroes are made manifest, and not just in one location! Historians and legend seekers argue about where Arthur of the Britons, and Robin Hood *really* lived and fought and don't realize that they lived in *many* sites. And another important fact to remember is that when the pre-mythago forms, it forms in the *whole* population ... and when it is no longer needed, it remains in our collective unconscious and is transmitted through the generations."

"And the changing form of the mythago," I said, to see if I had understood my sketchy reading of father's notes, "is based on an archetype, an archaic primary image which father called the Urscumug and from which all later forms come. And he tried to raise the Urscumug from his own unconscious mind...."

"And failed to do so," said Christian, "although not for want of trying. The effort killed him. It weakened him so much that his body couldn't take the pace. But he certainly seems to have created several of the more recent adaptations of the Urscumug."

There were so many questions, so many areas that begged for clarification. One above all: "But a thousand years ago, if I understand the notes correctly, there was a country-wide *need* of the hero, the legendary figure, acting for the side of Right. How can one man capture such a passionate mood? How did he *power* the interaction? Surely not from the simple family anguish he caused among us, and in his own head. As he said, that created an unsettled mind and he couldn't function properly."

"If there's an answer," said Christian calmly, "it's to be found in the woodland area, perhaps in the hogback glade. The old man wrote in his notes of the need for a period of solitary existence, a period of meditation. For a year, now, I've been following his example directly. He invented a sort of electrical bridge which seems to *fuse* elements from each half of the brain. I've used his equipment a great deal, with and without him. But I already find images — the pre-mythagos — forming in my peripheral vision *without* the complicated program that he used. He was the pioneer; his own interaction with the wood has made it easier for those who come after. He achieved a certain success; I intend to complete his work, eventually. I shall raise the Urscumug, this hero of the first men."

"To what end, Chris?" I asked quietly, and in all truth could not see a

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reason for so tampering with the ancient forces that inhabited both woodland and human spirit. Christian was clearly obsessed with the idea of raising these dead forms, of finishing something the old man had begun. But in reading his notebook, and in my conversation with Christian, I had not heard a single word that explained *why* so bizarre a state of nature should be so important to the ones who studied it.

Christian had an answer. And as he spoke to me his voice was hollow, the mark of his uncertainty, the stigma of his lacking conviction in the truth of what he said. "Why, to study the earliest times of man, Steve. From these mythagos we can learn so much of how it was and how it was hoped to be. The aspirations, the visions, the cultural identity of a time so far gone that even its stone monuments are incomprehensible to us. To learn. To communicate through those persistent images of our past that are locked in each and every one of us."

He stopped speaking, and there was the briefest of silence, interrupted only by the heavy rhythmic sound of the clock. I said, "I'm not convinced, Chris." For a moment I thought he would shout his anger; his face flushed, his whole body tensed up, furious with my calm dismissal of his script. But the fire softened, and he frowned, staring at me almost helplessly. "What does that mean?"

"Nice sounding words; no conviction."

After a second he seemed to acknowledge some truth in what I said. "Perhaps my conviction has gone, then, buried beneath ... beneath the other thing. Guiwenneth. She's become my main reason for going back now."

I remembered his callous words of a while ago, about how she had no life yet a thousand lives. I understood instantly and wondered how so obvious a fact could have remained so doggedly elusive to me. "She was a mythago herself," I said. "I understand now."

"She was my father's mythago, a girl from Roman times, a manifestation of the Earth Goddess, the young warrior princess who can unite the tribes. I can find no recorded legends about her, but she is associated with the oral tradition, with the Celtic tradition of keeping a name silent. She was a powerful woman, and led — in all her appearances — a powerful resistance to the Romans...."

"Like Queen Boadicea."

"Before and after that uprising. Legends of Guiwenneth inspired many tribes to take offensive action against the invader." His gaze became distant for a moment. "And then she was formed in this wood, and I found her and came to love her. She was not violent, perhaps because the old man himself could not think of a woman being violent. He imposed a structure on her, disarming her, leaving her quite helpless in the forest."

"How long did you know her?" I

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asked, and he shrugged.

"I can't tell, Steve. How long have I been away?"

"Twelve days or so."

"As long as that?" He seemed surprised. "I thought no more than three. Perhaps I knew her for many months, then, but it seems no time at all. I lived in the forest with her, trying to understand her language, trying to teach her mine, speaking with signs and yet always able to talk quite deeply. But the old man pursued us right to the heartwoods, right to the end. He wouldn't let up — she was *his* girl, and he had been as struck by her as had I. I found him, one day, exhausted and terrified, half buried by leaves at the forest edge. I took him home and he was dead within the month. That's what I meant by his having had a reason for attacking me. I took Guiwenneth from him."

"And then she was taken from you. Shot dead."

"A few months later, yes. I became a little too happy, a little too content. I wrote to you because I had to tell *someone* about her ... clearly that was too much for fate. Two days later I found her in a glade, dying. She might have lived if I could have got help to her in the forest, and left her there. I carried her out of the wood, though, and she died." He stared at me and the expression of sadness hardened to one of resolve. "But when I'm back in the wood, her myth image in my own subconscious has a chance of being formed ... she might be a little tougher than my father's version, but I can find her again, Steve, if I look hard, if I can find that energy you asked about, if I can get into the deepest part of the wood, to that central vortex...."

I looked at the map again, at the spiral field around the hogback glade. "What's the problem? Can't you find it?"

"It's well defended. I get near it, but I can't ever get beyond the field that's about two hundred yards around it. I find myself walking in elaborate circles even though I'm convinced I've walked straight. I can't get in, and whatever's in there can't get out. All the mythagos are tied to their genesis zones, although the Twigling, and Guiwenneth too, could get to the very edge of the forest, down by the pool."

But that wasn't true! And I'd spent a shaky night to prove it. I said, "One of the mythagos has come out of the wood ... a tall man with the most unbelievably terrifying hound. He came into the yard and ate a leg of pork."

Christian looked stunned. "A mythago? Are you sure?"

"Well, no. I had no idea at all what he was until now. But he stank, was filthy, had obviously lived in the woods for months, spoke a strange language, carried a bow and arrows...."

"And ran with a hunting dog. Yes, of course. It's a late Bronze Age, early Iron Age image, very widespread. The Irish have taken him to their own with Cuchulainn, made a big hero out of

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him, but he's one of the most powerful of the myth images, recognizable all across Europe." Christian frowned then. "I don't understand ... a year ago I saw him and avoided him, but he was fading fast, decaying .... it happens to them after a while. Something must have fed the mythago, strengthened it...."

"Some *one*, Chris."

"But who?" It dawned on him then, and his eyes widened slightly. "My God. Me. From my own mind. It took the old man years, and I thought it would take me a lot longer, many more months in the woodlands, much more isolation. But it's started already, my own interaction with the vortex...."

He had gone quite pale, and he walked to where his staff was propped against the wall, picked it up and weighed it in his hands. He stared at it, touched the markings upon it.

"You know what this means," he said quietly, and, before I could answer, went on, "She'll form. She'll come back, my Guiwenneth. She may be back already."

"Don't go rushing off again, Chris. Wait a while; rest."

He placed his staff against the wall again. "I don't dare. If she has formed by now, she's in danger. I have to go back." He looked at me and smiled thinly, apologetically. "Sorry brother. Not much of a homecoming for you."

As quickly as this, after the briefest of reunions, I had lost Christian again. He was in no mood to talk, too distracted by the thought of Guiwenneth alone and trapped in the forest to allow me much of an insight into his plans and into his hopes and fears for some resolution to their impossible love affair.

I wandered through the kitchen and the rest of the house as he gathered his provisions together. Again and again he assured me that he would be gone for no more than a week, perhaps two. If she was in the wood, he would have found her by that time; if not, then he would return and wait awhile before going back to the deep zones and trying to form her mythago. In a year, he said, many of the more hostile mythagos would have faded into nonexistence, and she would be safer. His thoughts were confused, his plan that he would strengthen her to allow her the same freedom as the man and the hound did not seem supportable on the evidence from our father's notes; but Christian was a determined man. If one mythago could escape, then so could the one he loved.

One idea that appealed to him was that I should come with him as far as the glade where we had made camp as children, and pitch a tent there. This could be a regular rendezvous for us, he said, and it would keep his time-sense on the right track. And if I spent time in the forest, I might encounter other mythagos and could report on their state. The glade he had in mind was at the edge of the wood, and quite safe.

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When I expressed concern that my own mind would begin to produce mythagos, he assured me that it would take months for the first pre-mythago activity to show up as a haunting presence at the edge of my vision. He was equally blunt in saying that, if I stayed in the area for too long, I would certainly start to relate to the woodland, whose aura — he thought — had spread more towards the house in the last few years.

Late the following morning we set off along the south track. A pale yellow sun hung high above the forest. It was a cool, bright day, the air full of the scent of smoke, drifting from the distant farm where the stubbly remains of the summer harvest were being burned. We walked in silence until we came to the millpond; I had assumed Christian would enter the oak woodland here, but wisely he decided against it; not so much because of the strange movements we had seen there as children, but because of the marshy conditions. Instead, we walked on until the woodland bordering the track thinned. Here Christian turned off the path.

I followed him inwards, seeking the easiest route between tangles of bracken and nettles, enjoying the heavy stillness. The trees were small, here at the edge, but within a hundred yards they began to show their real age, great gnarled oakwood trunks, hollow and half-dead, twisting up from the ground, almost groaning beneath the weight of their branches. The ground rose slightly, and the tangled undergrowth was broken by weathered, lichen-covered stubs of grey limestone; we passed over the crest, and the earth dipped sharply down, and a subtle change came over the woodland; it seemed darker, somehow, more alive, and I noticed that the shrill September bird-sound of the forest edge was replaced here by a more sporadic, mournful song.

Christian beat his way through bramble thickets, and I trudged wearily after, and we soon came to the large glade where, years before, we had made our camp. One particularly large oak tree dominated the surrounds, and we laughed as we traced the faded initials we had once carved there. In its branches we had made our lookout tower, but we had seen very little from that leafy vantage point.

"Do I look the part?" asked Christian, holding his arms out, and I grinned as I surveyed his caped figure, the rune-inscribed staff looking less odd now, more functional.

"You look like something. Quite what, I don't know."

He glanced around the clearing. "I'll do my best to get back here as often as I can. If anything goes wrong, I'll try and leave a message if I can't find you, some mark to let you know...."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," I said with a smile. It was clear that he didn't wish me to accompany him be-

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yond this glade, and that suited me. I felt a chill, an odd tingle, a sense of being watched. Christian noticed my discomfort and admitted that he felt it too, the presence of the wood, the gentle breathing of the trees.

We shook hands, then embraced awkwardly, and he turned on his heels and paced off into the gloom. I watched him go, then listened, and only when all sound had gone did I set about pitching the small tent.

For most of September the weather remained cool and dry, a dull sort of month, that enabled me to drift through the days in a very low-key state. I worked on the house, read some more of father's notebook (but quickly tired of the repetitive images and thoughts) and with decreasing frequency walked into the woodlands and sat near, or in the tent, listening for Christian, cursing the midges that haunted the place, and watching for any hint of movement.

With October came rain and the abrupt, almost startling realization that Christian had been gone for nearly a month. The time had slipped by, and instead of feeling concerned for him I had merely assumed that he knew what he was doing and would return when he was quite ready. But he had been absent for weeks without even the slightest sign! He could surely have come back to the glade once and left some mark of his passing.

Now I began to feel more concern for his safety than perhaps was warranted. As soon as the rain stopped, I trudged back through the forest and waited out the rest of the day in the miserable, leaking canvas shelter. I saw hares and a wood owl and heard distant movements that did not respond to my cries of "Christian? Is that you?"

It got colder. I spent more time in the tent, creating a sleeping bag out of blankets and some tattered oilskins I found in the cellar of Oak Lodge. I repaired the splits in the tent and stocked it with food and beer and dry wood for fires. By the middle of October I noticed that I could not spend more than an hour at the house before becoming restless, an unease that could only be dispelled by returning to the glade and taking up my watching post, seated cross-legged just inside the tent, watching the gloom a few yards away. On several occasions I took long, rather nervous sorties further into the forest, but I disliked the sensation of stillness and the tingling of my skin that seemed to repeatedly say that I was being watched. All imagination, of course, or an extremely sensitive response to woodland animals, for on one occasion, when I ran screaming and yelling at the thicket wherein I imagined the voyeur was crouched, I saw nothing but a red squirrel go scampering in a panic up into the crossed and confused branches of its home oak.

Where *was* Christian? I tacked paper messages as deep in the woods and in as many locations, as I could. But I found that whenever I walked too far

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into the great dip that seemed to be swallowing the forest down, I would, at some point within the span of a few hours, find myself approaching the glade and the tent again. Uncanny, yes, and infuriating too, but I began to get an idea of Christian's own frustration at not being able to maintain a straight line in the dense oakwood. Perhaps, after all, there *was* some sort of field of force, complex and convoluted, that channeled intruders back onto an outward track.

And November came, and it was very cold indeed. The rain was sporadic and icy, but the wind reached down through the dense, browning foliage of the forest and seemed to find its way through clothes and oilskin and flesh to the cooling bones beneath. I was miserable, and my searches for Christian grew more angry, more frustrated. My voice was often hoarse with shouting, my skin blistered and scratched from climbing trees. I lost track of time, realizing on more than one occasion, and with some shock, that I had been two, or perhaps three days in the forest without returning to the house. Oak Lodge grew stale and deserted. I used it to wash, to feed, to rest, but as soon as the worst ravages to my body were corrected, thoughts of Christian, anxiety about him, grew in my mind and pulled me back to the glade, as surely as if I were a metal filing tugged to a magnet.

I began to suspect that something terrible had happened to him, or perhaps not terrible, just natural: if there really were boars in the wood, he might have been gored by one and be either dead or dragging himself from the heartwoods to the edge, unable to cry for help. Or perhaps he had fallen from a tree or quite simply gone to sleep in the cold and wet and failed to revive in the morning.

I searched for any sign of his body or his having passed by, and I found absolutely nothing, although I discovered the spoor of some large beast and marks on the lower trunks of several oaks that looked like nothing else than the scratchings of a tusked animal.

But my mood of depression passed, and by mid-November I was quite confident again that Christian was alive. My feelings, now, were that he had somehow become trapped in this autumnal forest.

For the first time in two weeks I went into the village, and after obtaining food supplies, I picked up the papers that had been accumulating at the tiny newsagents. Skimming the front pages of the weekly local, I noticed an item concerning the decaying bodies of a man and an irish wolfhound, discovered in a ditch on a farmland near Grimley. Foul play was not suspected. I felt no emotion, apart from a curious coldness, a sense of sympathy for Christian, whose dream of freedom for Guiwenneth was surely no more than that, a fervent hope, a desire doomed to frustration.

As for mythagos, I had only two

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encounters, neither of them of much note; the first was with a shadowy man-form that skirted the clearing, watching me, and finally ran into the darkness, striking at the trunks of trees with a short wooden stick. The second meeting was with the Twigling, whose shape I followed stealthily as he walked to the millpond and stood in the trees, staring across at the boathouse. I felt no real fear of these manifestations, merely a slight apprehension. But it was only after the second meeting that I began to realize how alien was the wood to the mythagos, and how alien were the mythagos to the wood. These were creatures created far away from their natural age, echoes of the past given substance, equipped with a life, a language and a certain ferocity that was quite inappropriate to the war-scarred world of 1947. No wonder the aura of the woodland was so charged with a sense of solitude, an infectious loneliness that had come to inhabit the body of my father, and then Christian, and which was even now crawling through my own tissues and would trap me if I allowed it.

It was at this time, too, that I began to hallucinate. Notably at dusk, as I stared into the woodlands, I saw movement at the edge of my vision. At first I put this down to tiredness or imagination, but I remembered clearly the passage from my father's notebook in which he described how the pre-mythagos, the initial images, always appeared at his peripheral vision. I was frightened at first, unwilling to acknowledge that such creatures could be resident in my own mind and that my own interaction with the woodland had begun far earlier than Christian had thought; but after a while I sat and tried to see details of them. I failed to do so. I could sense movement and the occasional manlike shape, but whatever field was inducing their appearance was not yet strong enough to pull them into full view; either that, or my mind could not yet control their emergence.

On the 24th of November I went back to the house and spent a few hours resting and listening to the radio. A thunderstorm passed overhead, and I watched the rain and the darkness, feeling quite wretched and cold. But as soon as the air cleared and the clouds brightened, I draped my oilskin about my shoulders and headed back to the glade. I had not expected to find anything different, and so what should have been a surprise was more of a shock.

The tent had been demolished, its contents strewn and trampled into the sodden turf of the clearing. Part of the guy rope dangled from the higher branches of the large oak, and the ground hereabouts was churned as if there had been a fight. As I walked into the space, I noticed that the ground was pitted by strange footprints, round and cleft, like hooves, I thought. Whatever the beast had been, it had quite effectively torn the canvas shelter to tatters.

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I noticed then how silent the forest was, as if holding its breath and watching. Every hair on my body stood on end, and my heartbeat was so powerful that I thought my chest would burst. I stood by the ruined tent for just a second or two and the panic hit me, making my head spin and the forest seem to lean towards me. I fled from the glade, crashing into the sopping undergrowth between two thick oak trunks. I ran through the gloom for several yards before realizing I was running *away* from the woodland edge. I think I cried out, and I turned and began to run back.

A spear thudded heavily into the tree beside me, and I had run into the black wood shaft before I could stop; a hand gripped my shoulder and flung me against the tree. I shouted out in fear, staring into the mud-smeared, gnarled face of my attacker. He shouted back at me:

"Shut up, Steve! For God's sake, shut up!"

My panic quietened, my voice dropped to a whimper, and I peered hard at the angry man who held me. It was Christian, I realized, and my relief was so intense that I laughed and for long moments failed to notice what a total change had come about him.

He was looking back towards the glade. "You've got to get out of here," he said, and before I could respond, he had wrenched me into a run and was practically dragging me back to the tent.

In the clearing he hesitated and looked at me. There was no smile from behind the mask of mud and browning leaves. His eyes shone, but they were narrowed and lined. His hair was slick and spiky. He was naked but for a breechclout and a ragged skin jacket that could not have supplied much warmth. He carried three viciously pointed spears. Gone was the skeletal thinness of summer. He was muscular and hard, deep-chested and heavy-limbed. He was a man made for fighting.

"You've got to get out of the wood, Steve, and for God's sake don't come back."

"What's happened to you, Chris...?" I stuttered, but he shook his head and pulled me across the clearing and into the woods again, towards the south track.

Immediately he stopped, staring into gloom, holding me back. "What is it, Chris?" And then I heard it too, a heavy crashing sound, something picking its way through the bracken and the trees towards us. Following Christian's gaze, I saw a monstrous shape, twice as high as a man, but man-shaped and stooped, black as night save for the great white splash of its face, still indistinct in the distance and greyness.

"God, it's broken out!" said Chris. "It's got between us and the edge."

"What is it? A mythago?"

"*The* mythago," said Chris quickly, and turned and fled back across the

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clearing. I followed, all tiredness suddenly gone from my body.

"The Urscumug? That's *it*? But it's not human ... it's animal. No human was ever that tall."

Looking back as I ran, I saw it enter the glade and move across the open space so fast I thought I was watching a speeded up film. It plunged into the wood behind us and was lost in darkness again, but it was running now, weaving between trees as it pursued us, closing the distance with incredible speed.

Quite suddenly the ground went out from under me. I fell heavily into a depression in the ground, to be steadied, as I tumbled, by Christian, who moved a bramble covering across us and put a finger to his lips. I could barely make him out in this dark hidey hole, but I heard the sound of the Urscumug die away. I queried what was happening.

"Has it moved off?"

"Almost certainly not," said Christian. "It's waiting, listening. It's been pursuing me for two days, out of the deep zones of the forest. It won't let up until I'm gone."

"But why, Chris? Why is it trying to kill you?"

"It's the old man's mythago," he said. "He brought it into being in the heartwoods, but it was weak and trapped until I came along and gave it more power to draw on. But it was the old man's mythago, and he shaped it slightly from his own mind, his own ego. Oh God, Steve, how he must have hated, and hated *us*, to have imposed such terror onto the thing."

"And Guiwenneth..." I said.

"Yes ... Guiwenneth..." Christian echoed, speaking softly now. "He'll revenge himself on me for that. If I give him half a chance."

He stretched up to peer through the bramble covering. I could hear a distant restless movement, and thought I caught the sound of some animal grumbling deep in its throat.

"I thought he'd failed to create the primary mythago."

Christian said, "He died believing that. What would he have done, I wonder, if he'd seen how successful he'd been." He crouched back down in the ditch. "It's like a boar. Half boar, half man; it walks upright, but can run like the wind. It paints its face white in the semblance of a human face. Whatever age it lived in, one thing's for sure, it lived a long time before man as *we* understand 'man' existed; this thing comes from a time when man and nature were so close that they were indistinguishable."

He touched me then, on the arm, a hesitant touch, as if he were half afraid to make this contact with one from whom he had grown so distant.

"When you run," he said, "run for the edge. Don't stop. And when you get out of the wood, don't come back. There is no way out for me now. I'm trapped in this wood by something in my own mind as surely as if I were a

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mythago myself. Don't come back here, Steve. Not for a long, long time."

"Chris—" I began, but too late. He had thrown back the covering of the hole and was running from me. Moments later the most enormous shape passed overhead, one huge black foot landing just inches from my frozen body. It passed by in a split second, but as I scrambled from the hole and began to run, I glanced back, and the creature, hearing me, glanced back too, and for that instant of mutual contemplation, as we both moved apart in the forest, I saw the face that had been painted across the blackened features of the boar.

The Urscumug opened its mouth to roar, and my father seemed to leer at me.

CODA

One morning, in early spring, I found a brace of hare hanging from one of the pothooks in the kitchen; below them, scratched in the yellow paintwork on the wall, was the letter C. The gift was repeated about two months later, but then nothing, and a year has passed.

I have not been back to the wood.

I have read my father's diary ten times if I have read it once, steeping myself in the mystery of his life as much as he had steeped himself in the mystery of his own unconscious links with the primeval woodland. I find, in his erratic recordings, much that tells of his sense of danger, of what — just once — he calls 'ego's mythological ideal,' the involvement of the creator's mind which he feared would influence the shape and behavior of the mythago forms. He had known of the danger, then, but I wonder if Christian had fully comprehended this most subtle of the occult processes occurring in the forest. From the darkness and pain of my father's mind a single thread of gentleness and love had emerged in the fashioning of a girl in a green tunic, dooming her to a helplessness in the forest that was contrary to her natural form. But if she were to emerge again, it would be with Christian's mind controlling her, and Christian had no such preconceived ideas about a woman's strength or weakness. It would not be the same encounter.

It is summer now. The trees are full-leaved, the forest at its most impenetrable. I stay in the house, out of range, although I've noticed that, at dusk especially, shapes and figures begin to cluster in my peripheral vision. The aura of the woodland has reached the front of the house. Only in the back room, among the books and specimens, can I find a temporary escape from the encroaching dark.

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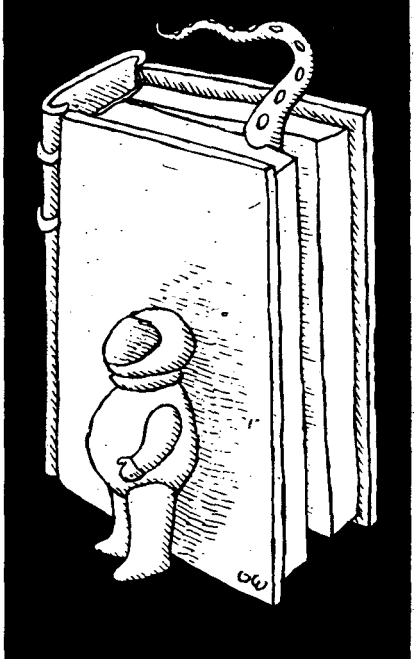
Books

BARRY N. MALZBERG



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Dream Makers, by Charles L. Platt, Berkley Books, $2.75.

Fantastic Lives: Autobiographical Essays by Notable Science Fiction Writers, edited by Martin Harry Greenberg, Southern Illinois University Press, $15.00.

What If? Volumes I and II, edited by Richard A. Lupoff, Pocket Books, $2.50 each.

Junction, by Jack M. Dann, Dell Books, $2.25.

Phillip Roth points out (in *Reading Myself and Others*) that he got into all that trouble with *Portnoy's Complaint* because a novel in the form of a confession was misconstrued by various well-meaning sorts as a confession in the form of a novel. It is only a few tottering steps from that insight to these provinces and a speculation: in the old days science fiction might have been characterized as confessions in the form of — well — science fiction, but in true decadent splendor the field has now made it possible to have confessions in the form of confessions. Hence Charles Platt's 29 interviews with 26 modern science fiction writers. (Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight interviewed one another; Mary Kornbluth spoke about her late husband on the telephone); hence Martin Greenberg's collection of nine personal essays by established figures who did not make it into the 1975 Harrison/Aldiss *Hell's Cartographers*, the obvious inspiration for this book. Hence also Lupoff's anthologies which are personal ruminations on the history of the awards

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process in science fiction interrupted by stories which are Lupoff's personal best of their years. Hence even Jack M. Dann's second novel, *Junction*, which in its power and the naked self-exposure of the protagonist's persona (*not* the authorial persona, it must be emphasized; a skillful novel is never autobiographical even if it is) strikes me as the kind of work which not only would have been unpublishable in this genre as recently as 1970 but would not even have been considered worth writing by any established professional simply because it could not have found a market. (Self-censorship is the least visible and the most effective censorship of all.)

Most of the subjects of *Dream Makers* and *Fantastic Lives* paid dues back in that dismal time of course, before academia, symposia, technological advance and the expansion of audience had granted any value to their persona, and it may explain their willingness, indeed wistful eagerness to open up for the page and for the tape recorder. Platt's method went beyond the interview however; interwoven with the statements of his subjects are Platt's impressions of them, his description of domicile, his critical judgement on some of their work and his assessment of their self-assessments; all of this cunning involution leading to one of the most important works about science fiction and its processes and to a book which may be considered decades from now to be the one work about the field which every student of it in this time *must* read. What *Dream Makers* is about is nothing other than the effect the writing of science fiction has had upon a group of people who are otherwise as heterogeneous and scattered as any group might be, and the ultimate impact of the book may be terrifying because all of these people — people as diverse as Ed Bryant, Frank Herbert, Kate Wilhelm, Isasc Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Michael Moorcock, Ian Watson — seem to be suffering in about the same way; it is only the symptomatology that varies, certain defense mechanisms which might be contemptible to one writer being seized upon by another and vice and versa and so on.

That effect and the symptomatology probably has something to do with the interface* between the visions of these writers which are quite powerful, disturbing and profound and the nature of their lives of middle class Americans in this technocratized, bureaucratized, anomic and awful century; the disparity between private passion and public anonymity has in various ways forced them into personae and masks of self-delusion. Asimov wants to be seen as an ordinary, modestly remunerated working man, Brunner as a patron of libertarian causes, Delany as a meta-

**In the dozen years that I have been writing essays, criticism and reviews I have never used this word until now and I herewith promise not to use it for* another *dozen years.*

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physician in search of a New Definition of science fiction, Robert Sheckley as a kind of holy naif on the borders of expectation, Budrys as an artisan wedding his expeditions for a More Perfect Science Fiction in the interstices of a practical, middle-class life, Disch as a litterateur, Farmer as a proletarian with purple patches, Aldiss as an establishmentarian, Bryant as an artist trying to break free of self-doubt, Silverberg as a modest custodian of his talent now dedicated to pleasing the people, Ellison as — well, as many things and on and on and on; of all these persons the only one who does not seem to have a good handle on how he wants to appear is your faithful oversigned whose shrieks of confusion and pain are interrupted gently by Platt only to enable breath to be recaptured for additional shrieks. That writing science fiction in America might be a terribly painful and enervating pursuit for those who take it seriously can certainly be inferred from these interviews — Philip K. Dick's is Exhibit A — but it is almost never stated. *Dream Makers* lives and breathes in its implication; Platt is there to make careful and occasionally deflating observations, and the brief appendices (Platt attributes them to the Nicholls *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*) limning out the body of work are useful and factual, but what this book is really about can only be perceived in its silence and shadows. It is a fearfully upsetting and unsettling book to at least this one science fiction writer and it becomes more unsettling on every additional reading (and this book must be read at least twice if it is read at all); it is also, because of Platt's considerable literary skill, clarity of mind and not always masked impiousness a sardonic and deflating accomplishment.

Some of the later interviews (the book is organized chronologically as the interviews took place, beginning with Asimov in NYC in early 1978 and ending at the World SF Convention in England in September of 1979) are truncate and hasty; lack the force and scope of the earlier ones (because the writers seen at the convention were not seen at home) and the interview with Mary Kornbluth transcribed from a 1973 phone conversation does not belong in the book; it is superficial and (the sole exception for *Dream Makers*) unchallenged. Otherwise I have no quarrel with this book, which will have a sequel (29 all-new all-different means of coping!!) and which should be forced into the hands of every Clarion Workshop attendee upon entrance into the dormitory. It might have been meant to save a lot of people a lot of trouble.

Fantastic Lives might save people trouble too — the example of *Hell's Cartographers* proves that science fiction writers can do a literary or personal memoir, in the main, better than almost any other group — but it is not as happy or observant an example as its predecessor or as *Dream Makers*; in

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Hell's Cartographers the editors, Harrison and Aldiss either lucked into or sought out six writers who unbidden could do the autobiographical essay at the top of their form, but Martin H. Greenberg with, perhaps, less of a budget and less of an impetus (this book would obviously fall in the shadow of HC) has not been so fortunate. *Fantastic Lives* — essays by Ellison, Farmer, Lafferty, MacLean, your oversigned, Reynolds, Margaret St. Clair, Spinrad and van Vogt — appears to be a book which has not been so much edited as assembled; the call for manuscripts went out, in due course the manuscripts came in and went into galley with hardly a pause for copyediting. Greenberg cannot really be blamed for this — the essays were written for modest advances and, as Greenberg has pointed out, it is hardly possible to ask writers of stature to revise or start again for so little compensation — but this does not help the book which more than anything has the aspect of a missed opportunity. Only St. Clair and Van Vogt have done the job as it might have originally been construed; they write of their lives and careers in science fiction and the mutual effect which science fiction and their lives had upon one another with honesty and force but the seven other essayists have, alas, taken advantage rather than given it. Spinrad's "A Prince From Another Land" gives an interesting history of the (publisher-induced) failure of his novel *Passing Through the Flame* but tells us nothing whatsoever of Spinrad; it is only by grace of Greenberg's brief introduction that we are even given his age. Reynold's "Science Fiction and Socioeconomics" is about — well, it is about science fiction and socioeconomics, but again there are only hints of the Mack Reynolds who has been a voluntary expatriate for three decades, who was *Analog*'s most prolific contributor during the sixties and who in the 1976 *Best of Mack Reynolds* indicated an intelligence far more sardonic and rebellious than would be indicated here. Ellison in a "Memoir: I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" writes what would be an extended introduction to the story as it might appear in a collection but gives very little else; Katherine MacLean's "The Expanding Mind" writes of a childhood Katherine MacLean's first encounter with science fiction and lets us know nothing of even the adolescent; your faithful oversigned has spliced two (previously collected) essays with just a snippet of autobiography, Farmer has given some autobiographical detail but almost no interpretation (what was most valuable about *Hell's Cartographers* was that Silverberg, Aldiss, Harrison, Pohl, Bester and Knight all told us how it *felt* to be a science fiction reader, a science fiction writer) and R.A. Lafferty, uncharacteristically, has vented much bitterness but little instruction.

I am not asking any of these writers to grant us red meat, raw guts, the

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pure and living blood of the Lamb. (I did not.) I am only saying that if one accepts the invitation to appear in a book of this sort, at no matter how low an advance, one owes the editor and the readership more than what happened to be closest at hand last Thursday or what thrice-told tale he can, like a hollow toastmaster, get away with tonight. *Mea culpa;* I stand first among equals, but I think that if I had to do it over again I would have declined the invitation, would have (as I have before) done my non-confessionals in another place. Would that most of the rest of us in *Fantastic Lives* had done the same; perhaps the book will make a better impression than I think and make possible a sequel or sequels.

In the introduction to *What If?* Volume I, Richard A. Lupoff discusses the various awards which through the years have been established to run in competition with the Hugos which Lupoff (like all of the rest of us) feels are science fiction's major awards with major deficiencies which render it likely often enough to be little more than a popularity ballot and a rigged one at that. The John W. Campbell Awards, the Nebulas, the International Fantasy Awards, the Ditmars, the British Fantasy Federation, all of them honest attempts, Lupoff states but the problem is the cachet of the donor ... exactly who the hell *are* the small committees or groups (and in certain cases individuals) who grant these awards? The Hugos at least have a wide base; they are (at least in the last decade) open awards available for voting to anyone who cares to pay the fee to be a supporting member of a world science fiction convention. That gives the Hugos more credibility than could be found in any competing award, and the world (and the Hugo losers) are, hence stuck with them. *What If?*, a projected four volume set, will be an attempt to rectify injustices by awarding retroactive best of the year citations to writers and stories which should have/might have/could have won.

And Lupoff of course — almost self-evidently and probably in full consciousness — is hoist on his own, as we say in the boondocks, petard. Who *is* Richard A. Lupoff? He is a competent professional, a well known fan, the editor once of an award winning (1963) fan magazine, a reader and devotee and participant in this field for almost three decades ... but he is, nonetheless, simply Richard A. Lupoff, good fellow and true but merely one individual, and although the awarding of retroactive Hugos is a good and gimmicky idea for an anthology and is undoubtedly the basis upon which Pocket Books was sold the proposal, this is little more than one man's excuse for putting together one man's idea of a good anthology, and it is perhaps best to leave it at that. Lupoff's introductions are chatty, informal, reminiscent, high-spirited and brisk — call this the Spider Robinson school of High Fan

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Writing — and not filled with too many inaccuracies; there are inside jokes, allusions and references which will evade those readers who are not part of the convention-attending inner circle (which means 90% of the prospective audience for this book) but as an attempt to get back into print some stories which were overlooked in their time, *What If?* is laudable. Introductions, as Harlan Ellison of all people pointed out, can be skipped if you don't like them.

What If? was originally intended to be an enormous single volume; contemporary, bleak publishing exigencies cut it back first to a proposed double volume and the present intention to do it in four, the latter two to be published later this year. As a single book it might have been more impressive, have had a weightiness to it which would have granted an authority which in four skimpy books simply is not there, but with publisher prerogative there can be no quarrel. For the record, Lupoff's retroactive Hugo winners and their years are as follows:

1952: "Firewater," by William Tenn; 1953: "Four In One," by Damon Knight; 1954: "Golden Helix," by Theodore Sturgeon; 1955: "One Ordinary Day With Peanuts," by Shirley Jackson; 1956: "The Man Who Came Early," by Poul Anderson; 1957: "The Mile-Long Spaceship," by Kate Wilhelm; 1958: "Two Dooms," by Cyril M. Kornbluth; 1959: "The PI Man," by Alfred Bester; 1960: The Lost Kafoozalum," by Pauline Ashwell; 1961: "The Sources of the Nile," by Avram Davidson; 1962: "Where Is the Bird of Fire?" by Thomas Burnett Swann; 1963: "Stand-by," by Philip K. Dick; 1964: "Now Is Forever," by Thomas M. Disch; 1965: "All the King's Men," by Barrington J. Bailey.

Subjectivity is the name of this game: I think that Lupoff is probably right for '58 and '59 and can fight a good fight in '55 or '57. I also think that "One Ordinary Day With Peanuts" can hardly (with five anthology appearances in this field alone) be con-

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sidered an overlooked story; the same is true of "Mile-Long Spaceship." I think; I think ... but *I* didn't have the wit to work up the proposal for *What If?* Lupoff did and Lupoff prevails.

Jack M. Dann is perhaps the most underrated modern science fiction writer; born in 1945 he has published only two novels — the 1976 *Starhiker* and now *Junction*, which dates from magazine appearances in different form in the early seventies — and edited several anthologies but he has produced thirty or forty short stories (some of them collected in *Time-Tipping*, 1980) of uniformly high quality and at least five of them — "Time-tipping," "Amnesia," "A Quiet Revolution For Death," "Going Under" and "Camps" — are as fine as any work which has been published in the genre in its difficult and uneven history. In his more recent work the power of Dann's vision, refined by an unusual concentration of focus and remorseless clarity has put the work on a level of attainment comparable to Kozinski (whom he somewhat resembles) or the demented, terrible visions of Kafka or Mandelstam. Because his work comes closest in ambition and effect to the great European writers and because he is working in a genre which even in its most open period in the early seventies was not precisely oriented toward the remorseless, the difficult or the tormenting, Dann has not achieved due recognition although he has been able (to the editors' credit) to publish his work and now, with *Junction*, to achieve the mass market. (*Starhiker*, a Harper & Row hardcover, never found a paperback publisher.) *Junction* is a bildungsroman in reverse; its protagonist journeys to and eventually dwells in a hell which is not metaphorical; the devices of science fiction are used for the metaphysical, it is a rigorous and deadly trap of a novel which initially resists a reader but eventually will take the reader in, and it is another step in what I take to be one of the great careers not in science fiction but in American literature. Jack M. Dann is 36 years old. Kafka and Mandelstam, in pity and terror were done for at that age; Dann is about to truly begin.

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"I was starting to wonder if you'd turn up!"

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John Morressy returns with a new story about Kedrigern the wizard, his troll, Spot, and his ebony-haired girl friend, who never quite made the complete transition from toad to Princess until....

The Gifts of Conhoon

BY

JOHN MORRESSY

To the untrained eye, the two medallions were indistinguishable. Even Kedrigern was hard put to determine which of the two had hung around his neck since his acceptance into the guild of wizards and which had belonged to one of his colleagues. He could not begin to guess which of his fellow wizards had had the misfortune to be so rudely bereft of his talisman of power.

Both medallions were round, of a size to cover a man's palm, about the thickness of a small fingernail's breadth, egg-smooth on one side. Around the rim of the reverse side of each ran a band of symbols, cleanly and deeply incised into the metal. At the upper edge, just within the rings to which the silver chain was attached, were two notches: the larger, the Cleft of Clemency; the smaller, the Kerf of Judgement. In the exact center was a tiny hole, the Aperture of True Vision. At the bottom was a geometric pattern of crossing broken lines, which had no name.

Kedrigern hefted the two medallions in his hands and laid them gently in the pans of his balance. They came to rest on a perfect horizontal. He placed them back to back. They fitted so smoothly that he could scarce discern the crack of their junction. He turned them this way and that, squinted and peered and studied them, and at last replaced his own medallion around his neck. He laid the other before him and rang a dainty silver bell that stood on his cluttered table.

Minutes later, a grotesque little figure careened into the chamber on great slapping feet. It was Kedrigern's troll-of-all-work. He stood knee-high to his master, and most of him was head, and very ugly. He had large hands, larger

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feet, and not much to hold them all together.

"Fetch me a nice cold mug of ale, Spot. One of the large mugs," said the wizard.

"Yah?"

"No, just the ale. Be quick about it, but mind you don't spill any."

"Yah, yah!" Spot cried, in a voice like a distant war-trump, and reeled out of the chamber like a top-heavy galleon under full sail.

Kedrigern sat back in his chair and licked his lips in anticipation. Even here, in the shadowed cool of his study, the warmth of the summer afternoon was beginning to penetrate. He looked again at the medallion, lying in a patch of sunlight on the table before him, and on an impulse he snatched it up and hung it around his neck.

In an instant he tore it off and with a cry of dismay dropped it back on the table. It had weighed around his neck like an anchor, and the slender chain had been like a toothed garrote against the soft flesh. Clearly, wearing the medallion was not the solution to his dilemma.

What, then, was? A medallion of the guild was meant to be worn by a wizard, and Kedrigern himself was the only wizard within five days travel. It was not meant to be buried or hidden away. It could never be destroyed. Most certainly, it was not to be left lying about like some meaningless trinket. The medallion had great virtue and conferred a certain amount of power even on the uninitiated.

It was a considerable problem, and Kedrigern wished that the second medallion had never come into his possession.

Spot came flapping in, with a frost-coated mug of cold ale on a wooden salver, and whirled off again to be about his household duties. Kedrigern took a deep draft, sighed with comfortable satisfaction, and cocking his feet up on the edge of the table, he tipped his chair back and stared with unfocused eyes into the cobwebby corner of the room.

That was the trouble with Spot. Anything within the litle troll's reach was kept relentlessly scrubbed and dusted, but his range was limited. The upper bookshelves were blanketed with thick gray dust, like a bed of dead ash, and the corners were all rounded by cobwebs.

Kedrigern pondered the mess for a time; then, taking another pull at the mug, he rose to inspect his shelves more closely. They were very dusty indeed. It was shameful. As his eyes darted back and forth, disapproving, they lit on a small black book, passed it, returned, and held.

A glow of triumph lit the wizard's face. He had found his solution. Plucking down the book and blowing the dust from its upper surfaces, he leafed briskly through its pages until he came to the desired rubric: "To Summon Up an Unidentified Essence, Either Dead,

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Distant, or Sleeping, for Informational Purposes." With a quiet little laugh of pleasure, he withdrew to his table, pausing on his way to bolt the study door.

A few hours later, just at sundown, all was in readiness. The ring was drawn, the candles placed and lit, the medallion in proper position. Kedrigern cleared his throat — it was dry, but there was no time to correct that now — and began to recite the spell.

For a time, nothing happened. But when Kedrigern intoned a certain phrase, the candles wavered and then steadied and burned evenly once more. He came to the end of the spell and waited in silence. In the center of the ring, hovering over the medallion, was a shimmering wisp of smoke, no greater than the dying breath of a snuffed candle. It moved, and it grew, and as Kedrigern looked on, it filled out to the insubstantial likeness of a bald old man, white-bearded, untidily dressed, with a nasty wound on his head and an expression of puzzlement on his wrinkled features.

"Who are you who wore the medallion?" Kedrigern asked with solemn intonation.

"Devil a bit I know about that," said the apparition.

"Has your identity been stolen by enchantment?"

"Hard to say, that is."

"What befell you, then?"

"All that is known to me is a bloody great bash on the skull that has left me with the mother and father of all headaches and set me to blowing about the between-worlds like a puff of smoke."

"A ghost cannot have a headache."

"Easy for you to say, Mister Flesh-and-Bones," said the apparition peevishly. "For all your certainty, I have a head on me throbbing like the Black Drum of Dun na Goll when it summoned home at evening the nine thousand red cows that were the wealth and glory of Robtach of the Silver Elbows, Robtach who dwelt in the high hall of—"

"Conhoon!" Kedrigern cried happily.

"He did not dwell in Conhoon, that much I know, and I would appreciate you keeping your bloody voice to a whisper."

More softly, Kedrigern said, "You're Conhoon. Conhoon of the Three Gifts. Conhoon the Wizard — don't you remember?"

"It may be," said the apparition warily.

"It is. You belonged to a guild of wizards. Each of us wore a silver medallion like the one around my neck. Remember the medallion?"

"I do not."

"Do you recall the names of any of our brothers? Perhaps you remember Axpad, or Tristaver. Or Belsheer."

"I do not."

"Surely you remember Hithernils. He was our treasurer. Everyone meets

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him at one time or another."

"I do not remember your Hithernils or any of the others, and for the love of God, mister, will you shut your gob and give me a cold cloth to put on my head before I faint with the pain? Cruel enough to drag me here from the blessed silence of between-worlds, but to torture me with questions is inhuman."

"Ghosts do not have headaches."

"This ghost could kick the eyes out of your head if he ever got loose from this ring, and we would see about headaches then," said the apparition grimly.

Things were not working at all well. Kedrigern bit back his instinctive angry response and said mildly, "Conhoon, don't you remember anything? Don't you remember your three gifts?"

"The only gifts I require now are a cold cloth for my head, wool to plug my ears, and a stone the size of a baby to throw at you."

"Your first gift was sweetness of the tongue." Kedrigern paused for a moment, then went on. "The second gift was keenness of memory." He paused again, longer, and his expression grew thoughtful. "I cannot now recall the third gift of Conhoon, but I begin to suspect that you are not he."

"Do you now? Well, Mister Flesh-and-Bones, you will be pleased to know that your nagging has given a push to my memory, and I now recall—"

A knock came at the door. Kedrigern turned, and in the moment of his distraction, the apparition in the circle began to fade. It dwindled quickly, like smoke blowing through a crack, as Kedrigern looked helplessly on. The spell was completely shattered now, and there was no way to mend it. Muttering angrily, he went to the door, unbolted it, and pulled it wide.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Brereep?" came a voice gently, from the shadows.

At once his manner softened. "Ah, Princess, I'm sorry. I was working, and I completely forgot about dinner. I hope it isn't spoiled."

"Brereep."

"Good. I'd feel terrible if it were. Come inside. I'll just put a few things away, and we'll go to dinner directly," Kedrigern said, waving her into his sanctum.

The soft candleglow struck highlights from Princess' ebony hair and the golden coronet on her brows. Kedrigern gazed at her lovingly — she was wearing her dark-blue gown, one of his favorites — and squeezed her hand before turning to his cluttered table.

"Brereep?" she asked, looking curiously at the circle.

"Nothing much, really. Just a small magic to find out whose medallion that is." Kneeling by the circle and wetting his thumb, he rubbed a break in the line, neutralizing the magic. "Don't want anything slipping through while I'm not here," he explained. He removed the candles and then took up the medallion. "This was the property

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of Conhoon of the Three Gifts, I think. Can't be positive. He was one of our Irish members. He doesn't live too far off, but he always kept to himself."

"Brereep."

"No, I don't think so. He was a surly fellow. And it was all a waste of good magic, anyway. I still don't know what to do with this thing." He held up the medallion and it turned slowly, flashing mirrorlike in the multiple candlelight. Princess reached out to touch it. He placed it in her hand.

"Lovely thing, isn't it? It would look grand against that blue dress. I've always thought that silver looked best on a dark-haired woman. Something about the way the light...."

Their eyes met. She held the medallion against her dress and murmured, "Brereep?"

"Oh, no. That's only supposed to be worn by a wizard, and you ... well...."

He weighed the possibilities. The consequences of magic were always unpredictable, even to a wizard. Unauthorized wearing of the medallion might cause Princess to turn back into a toad, or into something far worse. Still, she had been enchanted once and lived for some time under a spell. That might qualify her, however marginally, as a wizard.

He looked at her, beautiful in the soft candleglow, and thought how it would be if she had her speech once again. They communicated fairly well now, but there were times when he longed to hear a woman's soft voice breathe his name. A croak did tend to undermine romantic moods. The sound of sweet song would be a welcome addition to the household ... long talks by the fireside in the cold winter nights ... reading aloud from the fine old books....

And then he recalled that one of Conhoon's three gifts was sweetness of the tongue. Clearly, the gift did not reside in Conhoon's person; it might be in the medallion; and if it was, it could be passed on. He took the medallion from her hands and held it up before her.

"There's a bit of a risk, Princess. Perhaps a big risk," he said.

"Brereep," she replied staunchly.

"You're right. Here goes, then."

He placed the silver chain around her neck, and she reached back to draw her hair free. The medallion lay on her breast like a full moon against the night sky. She took a deep breath, cleared her throat, swallowed, and looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Can you speak?" he asked apprehensively.

"I can," she replied.

"How do you feel? Different? Better? Sick?"

In a low sweet voice she said, "It is odd that I feel, and in three ways do I feel odd, and small good does it do me in body, mind, or heart to feel as I do, and less good to know that there is devil a thing I can do about it. First, I feel like the grain of sand in the right

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eye of Ciallglind that caused him to run mad and screaming in pain stark naked the length and breadth of Ireland for twelve bitter years in all manner of weather. Second, I feel like the splinter of pine in the ball of the thumb of Goiste that festered and grew red and pus-filled and caused his arm to swell up to the thickness of Kathleen MacRossa's leg, and him sworn to do battle single-handed against the sons of Nish at break of day. Third, I feel like the flea in the ear of Seisclend that caused him to forget wife and children and home, and forsake the gift of honeyed speech and the making of golden song on the harp, and live for sixteen years filthy grunting ragged and stinking, with the pigs of his own yard, and they taking constant advantage of him. And that is how I feel, and not pleasant is it to feel this way"

"I should think not," said Kedrigern.

"There is more to say, and say it I will in good time, but now a hunger is on me greater than the hunger of the sons of Ogan after doing battle four days and four nights, without stopping once for breath or refreshment, against the followers of Goll Black-Tooth to save the honor of the fair Fithir. Let us proceed to dinner," said Princess.

"By all means," Kedrigern said, taking her arm.

She spoke not a word during the meal. Kedrigern observed her closely, but could discern no side-effects brought on by her wearing of the medallion. As far as he could tell, it had given her back her power of speech, and nothing more.

Of course, it seemed to have given her back a considerably greater amount of speech than she might reasonably be expected to have lost. Kedrigern could not be certain, but he suspected that in the days before her enchantment, Princess had not responded to simple questions in the manner of a superannuated Hibernian delivering an after-dinner speech. But this, he assured himself, was probably the natural reaction to years of being unable to do anything but croak. It would surely pass.

"A delightful dinner," he said, patting his lips with his napkin. He said much the same thing every evening at this point.

"Grand it was, surely, and great is my satisfaction thereat," said Princess. Kedrigern smiled and nodded, and she went on, "I am pleased and comforted by this meal in five distinct ways, and I shall now expatiate upon my satisfaction under these five headings in prose of a incantatory nature."

"Well, that sounds—" Kedrigern began, but she broke in.

"The first way I am pleased is in my eyes, by the sight of the clean napery and the shining silver and the gleaming of candlelight on the wineglasses and the pleasant view of deepening twilight on the hills that rise like the Hills of Musheele beyond the farther window, and expecially pleased I am because there have many a time been greasy

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fingerprints on my plate and I unable to articulate my displeasure. These cleanly sights are as pleasing to me as the sight of the small white foot of Saraid of the Three Twins was to King Rory the Much-Bathed."

"Well, I'm glad that you—"

"And the second way I am pleased is in my nostrils, by the smell of the roasting duck and the tang of the wine and the clean scent of the fine wax candles. As pleasing to me are these mingled aromas as the fragrance of his stable was to Tuathal of the Black Bull. And the third way I am pleased is in my ears, by—"

"You must excuse me, my dear," said Kedrigern, starting up. "I just remembered that I left a candle burning in my study, and if—"

"You did not," she said. "If there is any politeness in you, you will sit still and listen while I tell of my satisfaction."

Kedrigern resumed his seat. He remained seated, fidgeting discreetly, while Princess went on to explain, with the help of illustrative examples, how the dinner had given her pleasure, comfort, and satisfaction of the ears, tastebuds, and fingertips. Having exhausted her sensory inventory, she paused for a breath and concluded, "And that is how I am satisfied by this lovely dinner."

"I'm glad," said Kedrigern warily, fearful that anything he said might bring on another monologue but too polite to remain churlishly silent.

She smiled, but spoke no more. For the rest of the evening she sat at her loom, and for a time she sang softly, to herself, in a mournful voice that Kedrigern found utterly enchanting. He could not distinguish the words, but the melody was of a beauty that needed no adornment, and he could not bring himself to interrupt her. He listened, eyes closed, while the evening breeze cooled his brow, and he relished his good fortune. Here was the sweet domesticity he had dreamed of, a joy unknown to his fellow wizards. He was a fortunate man indeed, and if Princess chose to rattle on now and then, well, he could put up with it in exchange for moments like this. After all, she had listened to him for years with no comment but an occasional "Brereep." Fair was fair.

The next day, he began to have second thoughts. Before breakfast, Princess spoke for the better part of an hour on the nine joys of a good night's sleep and the sixteen beauties of the dawn. Kedrigern spent the morning in his study, but at lunchtime she was ready with an extended recitation on the four goodnesses of bread, in which a woman named Dairne of the Plump Hands figured repeatedly in some obscure way. He returned quickly to his study, his stomach protesting the haste with which he had finished his meal, and emerged for dinner with great, and justified, trepidation. They dined in

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blessed silence, but the meal was preceded and followed by a two-part soliloquy on the thirty-three proper seasonings for a midsummer dinner. Kedrigern heavily oversalted his meat, drank an inordinate amount of wine to slake his thirst, and fell grumpily asleep just after sundown, to the strains of an elegiac song.

The next day he spent in the wood nearby, stocking up on necessaries of his profession. He left early and returned late, well past dinner time, and thus was audience only to a long lament concerning the tribulations of one Barach of the Tiny Foot, who had delayed a great queen's dinner and suffered much for it. He found himself with a mild headache.

For the next three days it rained, hard. Confined to the house, unable to remain long in his study, where the humidity was practically sub-aquatic, Kedrigern listened all day, each day. He noticed that Spot had tucked in his ears and taken to entering rooms cautiously and fleeing at the sight of Princess.

Kedrigern began to long for the sound of a soft "Brereep." He found himself pondering counterenchantments to neutralize Princess' medallion; even of stealing it as she slept. But these were dangerous courses, both to himself and to her. He had placed the medallion around her neck, and that was a deed not easily undone. He had certain responsibilities in the matter.

As a further complication, Princess seemed quite content with her newfound multiloquence, and he doubted that he could bring himself to deprive her of it. Talky she might be, but he loved her still.

On the first dry morning he awoke early, to blessed quiet. For a time, not even a bird peeped. Kedrigern drank in the sweet silence contentedly, knowing that it would end all too soon.

He raised himself slowly, stealthily, and leaning on one elbow he looked down on Princess. Her dark hair lay like a pool of night around her fair face. Her coral lips were slightly parted, and her breath was slow and regular. She was absolutely silent. Princess looked especially lovely this morning, and Kedrigern, forgetful of all else, reached out to take her in his arms.

But he hesitated when his fingertips were a scant hand's-breadth from her shoulder. He wanted to make love to Princess, with no more conversation than was necessary or fitting, as they had always done — and he feared that instead of her sweet sighs he would hear still another tale of mighty-thewed heroes and long-suffering damsels, narrated in a manner more suited to a maundering old sagaman than to the fair lips of Princess.

As he held his hand poised over her fair shoulder, wavering, she stirred, opened her eyes, and looked directly at him. Startled, he drew back his hand.

"Troubled were my dreams last night, Kedrigern my husband, and

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troubled my sleep as the sleep of Draigen of the Bloodshot Eyes." She yawned and went on: "For seven distinct dreams did I have, and all of them filled with omens that would make the hairs of your head to stand up like thorns and your blood to run as cold as the brook of Killfillen in the springtime, when the melting snows pour down the stony flanks of the Hills of Musheele. Tremble I did, and cry out, and try to flee, but my voice was taken from me and my feet as still as stone."

"Probably something you ate, my dear," said Kedrigern, slipping from the bed. "I noticed an odd tang to the gravy last evening. Perhaps Spot—"

"It is not gravy that filled me with terror, and I would think the better of you if you did not flee like the hinds of Sliabh Luachra at the sight of Finn Quick-Spear every time I open my mouth to speak," Princess broke in coldly.

Kedrigern bit his lip and said nothing. Princess looked at him darkly and disapprovingly for a time, then drew a deep breath preparatory to resuming her narrative. At that moment a loud knock at the front door echoed through the house.

"I will go," said Kedrigern, quickly pulling on his robe.

"You will stay and hear me. Spot it is who answers the door in this house."

The knock resounded again, accompanied by indistinct but angry-sounding shouts from below.

"There's a bad lot about these days, and that was not a friendly knock. I'm going," said Kedrigern.

Working a quick spell against bodily harm, he stalked to the door, drew the bolts, and flung it back. At the sight of a familiar figure, he gasped and started back. Before him stood a bald old man, white-bearded, untidily dressed, a dirty blood-stained rag binding his crown and an expression of great anger on his face.

"Conhoon! You're alive!?" Kedrigern cried.

"I am, and I want my medallion," said the visitor, raising his knobby walking stick in a menacing gesture.

"Ah, yes. Your medallion. Come in, Conhoon, we were just about to have breakfast. Would you like—"

"I would like my medallion, and no bloody foolishness from you."

"Of course. I understand completely. Come in and have a cup of tea, and we'll come to an amicable solution."

"To hell with an amicable solution! I want my medallion!" Conhoon howled.

At that moment, Princess appeared. She wore a gown of deep green, Her hair hung lose about her shoulders, and the medallion glistened like a star on her breast. When he saw it, Conhoon's eyes widened and he began to sputter. Kedrigern quickly made introductions.

"My dear, this is Conhoon of the Three Gifts. Conhoon, this is my wife, Princess. Conhoon is a colleague of mine, my dear, and we—"

"Would you leave the dear man

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standing out in the hot sun, and him with a bandage to his head and no food in his poor stomach? Come in, my fine Conhoon, come in to the cool and a cup of tea," Princess said sweetly.

"I thank you, lady, but it's for the medallion I've come, and if you'll be giving it to me, I'll be on my way," said Conhoon, more gently.

"It is a fine medallion," said Princess thoughtfully.

"It is, and sorry am I to be without it."

"How did you come to lose it?" Kedrigern asked.

"Devil a thing I know about that. One minute I'm dozing off in my garden, weak and exhausted from a spell to rid three counties of mice and moles, and the next thing I know I have a dent in my skull and a headache to make the eyes hop around in my head, and my house all torn to pieces and my medallion gone. Fortunate I am to be Conhoon of the Three Gifts, and my three gifts sweetness of the tongue, keenness of the memory, and hardness of the head. And if I find the bugger who laid me out, he will need a harder head than mine or we will hear no more from him."

"He already has a harder head," Kedrigern said. "I turned him to stone."

"Well, now, that was good of you,"said Conhoon, almost graciously. "And so I will take my medallion and go."

"Fond have I grown of this medallion," said Princess softly, touching the silver disc with her fingertips. "And I think that if I wished to keep it, my dear Kedrigern would come to my aid against any sorcerer or wizard or fellowship thereof...."

"Oh dear me," murmured Kedrigern.

"...but I would not cause such a bitter conflict in his soul," Princess went on. "My Kedrigern, my beautiful one, my beloved,' she crooned. "Fair he was in his youth, fair the hair and the brows of him, and smooth the skin of him, and long and slender the hands of him and clean the fingers thereof. Like blood on the breast of a white dove was the redness of his lips. Like red gold after the burnishing was his hair, and like cornflowers the blue of his far-seeing eyes. Smooth and soft as wool his skin, and straight his shins, and round and hard the knees of him as two wave-washed seashells."

"Why, thank you, my dear. Very nice of you to say so," said Kedrigern, a bit embarrassed but greatly pleased at her words.

"But the years have passed, and their passing has been heavy on my Kedrigern, the wise one, the once-fair. Gray as the dust under our sagging bed is rapidly turning the hair of him, and the lines of his face are as deep as the gullies in the hillsides of Musheele after the torrents of spring have dropped from the skies. Around his eyes the tiny lines are as numerous as the hairs on the heads of all the warriors who—"

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"You needn't go on, my dear, Conhoon doesn't want to hear—"

"I will go on," said Princess implacably. "Around his eyes—"

"For the love of God, woman, will you give me my medallion?!" cried Conhoon in an agony of impatience.

Princess paused. She looked fondly at Kedrigern; then she took the medallion in both hands. "I am loath to lose this lovely medallion and the power of fine speech it gave to me, and saddened by the thought of once more being forced to croak like a frog in response to intelligent and subtle questions. And I am saddened in nine distinct ways. But I will say no more." And lifting the medallion from around her neck, she placed it in Conhoon's outstretched hands.

That evening, Princess and Kedrigern dined in the coolness of the arbor, under the great oak. When Spot had cleared the things away, Kedrigern reached over to take Princess' hand in his.

"You did a fine, generous thing this morning," he said. "I promise you, my dear, that I will do everything in my power to complete the reversal of your spell. It's my absolute top priority."

She smiled at him. He squeezed her hand and went on. "There was one thing I wanted to ask you when you could speak at somewhat greater length, but in all the excitement it completely slipped my mind. Now I suppose I'll just have to wait."

She raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Oh, it's about ... about before. Your old life, before you were turned into a toad. I've always been curious about what you did, and where you lived, and what friends you had." He sighed. "Now I suppose I'll just have to wait."

She nodded solemnly, and, very slowly, she winked. "Brereep," she said.

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SF has produced a small and interesting body of work about the automobile, to which we can now add John Kessel's reductio ad absurdum *account of David Baker (born in the back seat of his parents westbound Chevy) and other heroes of the road.*

Not Responsible! Park and Lock It!

BY

JOHN KESSEL

(with thanks to Tim Roth)

David Baker was born in the back seat of his parents' Chevy in the great mechanized lot at mile 1.375 x 10^{25}. "George, we need to stop," his mother Polly had said. "I'm having pains." She was a week early.

They had been cruising along pretty well at twilight, his father concentrating on getting in another fifty miles before dark, when they'd been cut off by the big two-toned Mercury and George had had to swerve four lanes over into the far-right. George and Polly later decided that the near-accident was the cause of the premature birth. They even managed to laugh at the incident in retrospect — they ruefully retold the story many times, so that it was one of the family fables David grew up with — but David always suspected his father pined after those lost fifty miles. In return he'd gotten a son.

"Not responsible! Park and lock it!" the loudspeakers at the tops of the poles in the vast asphalt field of the lot shouted, over and over. For a first birth, Polly's labor was surprisingly short and painless, and the robot doctor emerged from the Chevy in the gathering evening with a healthy, seven-pound boy. George Baker flipped his cigarette away nervously, the butt glowing as it spun into the night. He smiled.

In the morning George stepped into the bar at the first rest stop, had a quick one, and registered his name: David John Baker. Born 8:15 Standard Westbound Time, June 13....

"What year is it?" George asked the attendant.

"802,701." The robot smiled benignly. It could not do otherwise.

"802,701." George repeated it aloud and punched the keys of the ter-

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minal. "Eight hundred two thousand, seven hundred and one." The numbers spun themselves out like a song. Eight-oh-two, seven-oh-one.

David's mother had smiled weakly, reclining in the passenger's seat, when they started up again. Her smile had never been strong. David slept on her breast.

Much later Polly told David what a good baby he'd been, not like his younger sister Caroline, who squalled and spit up and had the colic. David took satisfaction in that: he was the good one. It made the competition between him and Caroline even more intense. But that was later. As a baby David slept to the steady thrumming of the V-8 engine, the gentle rocking of the car. He was cooed at by the android attendants at the camps where they pulled over at the end of the day. His father would chat with the machine that came over to check the odometer and validate their mileage card. George would tell about any of the interesting things that had happened on the road — and he always seemed to have something — while Polly fixed supper at one of the grills and the ladies from the other cars sat around in a circle in front of the komfy kabins and talked about their children, their husbands, about their pregnancies and how often they got to drive. David sat on Polly's lap or played with the other kids. Once past the toddler stage he followed his dad around and watched, a little scared, as the greasy, self-assured robots busied themselves single-mindedly around the service station. They were large and composed. The young single drivers tried hard to compete with their mechanical self-containment. David hung on everything his dad said.

"The common driving man," George Baker said, hands on the wheel, "the good average driver — doesn't know his ass from a tailpipe."

Polly would draw David to her, as if to blot out the words. "George...."

"All right. The kid will know whether you or I want him to or not."

But David didn't know, and they wouldn't tell him. That was the way of parents: they never told you even when they thought they were explaining everything, and so David was left to wonder and learn as best he could. He watched the land speed by long before he had words to say what he saw; he listened to his father tell his mother what she should or should not do, and what was wrong and right with the world. And the sun set every night at the other end of that world, far ahead of them still, beyond the gas stations and the wash and brush-up buildings and the quietly deferential androids that always seemed the same no matter how far they'd gone that day, Westbound.

"This is the worst stretch of plains highway I've seen in my entire life. Maybe when I was seven we had a worse stretch, but there's no excuse for it. Look at those droids. It's a wonder

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the shoulders aren't lined with wrecks, given the state they've let the roads come to." His voice would trail off from bluster to wistfulness.

When David was six he got to sit on George's lap and hold the wheel in his hands and "drive the car." With what great chasms of anticipation and awe had he looked forward to those moments. His father would say suddenly, after hours of driving in silence, "Come sit on my lap, David. You can drive."

Polly would protest feebly that he was too young and it was dangerous. Fumbling and cautious, watching the road and the other cars, David would clamber into his dad's lap and grab the wheel. How warm it felt, how large, and how far apart he had to put his hands! The little ridges on the back of the wheel were too far apart for his fingers, so that two of his fit into the space meant for one adult's. George would move the seat up and scrunch his thin legs together so that David could see over the hood of the car. His father operated the pedals and gearshift, and most of the time he kept his left hand on the wheel too — but then he would slowly take it away, and David would be steering all by himself. His heart had beaten fast. At those moments the car seemed so large. The promise and threat of its speed had been almost overwhelming. Knowing that by a turn of the wheel you could be in the high-speed lanes; knowing, even more amazingly, that he, David, held in his hands the potential to steer them off the road, into the gully and fences, and death. The responsibility was great, and David took it seriously. He didn't want to do anything foolish; he didn't want to make George think him any less a man. He knew his mother was watching, whether with love or fear in her eyes he could not know, because he couldn't take his eyes from the road to see.

When David was seven there was a song on the radio that Polly sang to him, "We all drive on." That was his song. David sang it back to her, and his father laughed and sang it too, badly, voice hoarse and off-key, not like his mother whose voice was sweet and pure. "We all drive on," they sang together, "You and me and everyone/ Never ending, just begun/Driving, driving on."

"Goddamn right we drive on," George said. "Goddamn pack of maniacs."

David remembered clearly the first time he became aware of the Knapsack and the Notebook. It was one evening after they'd eaten supper and were waiting for Polly to get the cabin ready for bed. George had gone around to the trunk to check the spare, and this time he took a green knapsack out and, in the darkness near the edge of the campground, secretively opened it.

"Watch, David, and keep your mouth shut about what you see."

David watched.

"This is for emergencies." George,

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one by one, set the things on the ground: first a rolled oilcloth which he spread out, then a line of tools, then a gun and boxes of bullets, a first-aid kit, some packages of crackers and dried fruit, and some things David didn't know. One thing had a light and a thick wire and batteries in it.

"This is a metal detector, David. I made it myself." George took a black book from the sack. "This is my notebook." He handed it to David. It was heavy and smelled of the trunk.

"Maps of the Median, and...."

"George!" Polly's voice was a harsh whisper, and David jumped a foot. She grabbed his arm. George looked exasperated and a little guilty — though David did not identify his father's reaction as guilt until he thought about it much later. He was too busy trying to avoid the licking he thought was coming.

His mother marched him back to the car after giving George her best withering gaze.

"But, mom...."

"To sleep! Don't puzzle yourself about things you aren't meant to know, young man."

David puzzled himself. At times the Knapsack and the Notebook filled his thoughts. His father would give him a curious glance and tantalizingly vague answers whenever he asked about them safely out of earshot of Polly.

Shortly after that, Caroline was born. This time the Bakers were not caught by surprise, and Caroline came squawling into the world at the hospital at mile 1.375×10^{25}, where they stopped for three whole days for Polly's lying in. Nobody stopped for three whole days, for anything. David was impatient. They'd never *get* anywhere waiting, and the androids in the hospital were all boring, and the comic books in the waiting room, with its deadly silence and no vibrations, he had all read before.

This time the birth was a hard one. George sat hunched forward in a plastic chair, and David paced around, stomping on the cracks in the linoleum. He leaned on the dirty windowsill and watched all the cars fly by on the highway, Westbound, and in the distance, beyond the barbed wire, sentry towers and minefields, mysterious, ever unattainable — Eastbound.

After what seemed like a very long time, the white porcelain doctoroid came back to them. George stood up as soon as he appeared. "Is she...?"

"Both fine. A little girl. Seven pounds, five ounces," the doctoroid reported, grille gleaming.

George didn't say anything then, just sat down in the chair. After a while he came over to David, put his hand on the boy's shoulder, and they both watched the cars moving by, the light of the bright midsummer's sun flashing off the windshields as they passed, blinding them.

David was nine when they bought

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the Nash, and it had a big chrome grille that stretched like a bridge across the front, the vertical bars bulging outward in the middle, so that, with the headlights, the car looked to be grinning a big grin, a nasty grin.

David went with George through the car lot while Polly sat with Caroline in the lounge of the dealership. He watched his father dicker with the bow-tied sales droid. George acted as if he seriously meant to buy a new car, when in fact his yearly mileage average would entitle him to no more than a second-hand, second-rank sedan, unless he intended for them all to go hungry. He wouldn't have done that, however. Whatever else Polly might say about her husband, she could not say he ever failed to be a good provider.

"So why don't you show us a good used car," George said, running his hand through his thinning hair. "Mind you, don't show us any piece of junk."

The sales droid was, like his brothers, enthusiastic and unreadable. "Got just the little thing for you, Mr. Baker — a snappy number. C'mon." it said, rolling down toward the back of the lot.

"Here you go." It opened the door of the blue Nash with its amazingly dexterous hand. David's father got in. "Feel that genuine vinyl upholstery. Not none of your cheap plastics, that'll crack in a week of direct sun." The sales droid winked its glassy eye at David. "Hop in, son. See how you like it."

David started to, then saw the look of warning on George's face. "No, thanks," he said.

"Let's have a look at the engine," George said.

"Righto." The droid rolled around the fat front fender, reached through the grille and tripped the latch with a loud "clunk." The engine was clean as a whistle, the cylinder heads painted a nice cherry red, the spark plug leads numbered for easy changes. It was like the pictures out of David's schoolbooks.

The droid started up the Nash; the motor gave out a rumble and vibrated ever so slightly. David smelled the clean tang of evaporating gasoline.

"Only one owner," the droid said, volume turned up now so it could be heard over the sound of the engine.

George looked uncertain.

"How much?"

"Book says it's worth 200,000 validated miles. You can drive her out, with your Chevy in trade, for ... let me calculate ... 174,900."

Just then David noticed something in the engine compartment. On either side over the wheel wells there were cracks in the metal that had been painted over so you could only see them from the reflection of the sunlight where the angle of the surface changed. That was where the shocks connected up with the car's body.

He tugged at his father's sleeve. "Dad," he said, pointing.

George ran his hand over the metal.

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He looked serious, then David thought he was going to get mad. Instead he straightened up and smiled.

"How much did you say?"

The android stood stock still. "150,000 miles."

"But, dad —"

"Shut up, David," he said curtly. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Sixty. 100,000. And you reweld those wheel wells before we drive it an inch."

That was how they bought the Nash. The first thing George said when they were on their way again was, "Polly, that boy of ours is smart as a whip. The shocks were about to rip through the bodywork, and we'd've been scraping down the highway with our nose to the ground like a basset. David, you're a born driver, or else too smart to waste yourself on it."

David didn't quite follow that, but it made him a little more content to move into the back seat. At first he resented it that Caroline had taken his place in the front. She got all the attention, and David only got to sit and look out at where they had been, or what they were going by, never getting a good look at where they were going. If he leaned over the back of the front seat, his father would say, "Quit breathing down my neck, David. Sit down and behave yourself. Do your homework."

After a while he wouldn't have moved into the front if they'd asked him to: only babies did that. Instead he watched raptly out the left-side window for fleeting glimpses of Eastbound, wondering always about what it was, how it got there, and about the no-man's land and the people they said had died trying to cross. He asked George about it, and that started up the biggest thing they were ever to share together.

"They've told you about Eastbound in school, have they?"

"They told us we can't go there. Nobody can."

"Did they tell you why?"

"No."

His father laughed. "That's because they don't know why! Isn't that incredible, David? They teach a thing in school, and everybody believes it, and nobody knows why or even thinks to ask. But you wonder, don't you? I've seen it."

He did wonder. It amazed and scared him that his father would talk about it.

"Men are slip-streamers, David. Did you ever see a car follow close behind a big truck to take advantage of the windbreak to make the driving easier? That's the way people are. They'll follow so close they can't see six inches beyond their noses as long as it makes things easier. And the schools and the teachers are the biggest windbreaks of all. You remember that.

"Do you remember the knapsack in the trunk?"

"*George*," Polly warned.

"Be quiet, Polly. The boy's growing up." To David he said, "You know

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what it's for. You know what's inside."

"To go across...." David hesitated, his heart leaping.

"To cross the Median! We can do it. We don't have to be like everybody else, and when the time comes, when we need to get away the most, when things are really bad — we can do it! I'm prepared to do it."

Polly tried to shush him, and it became an argument. But David was thrilled at the new world that had opened. His father was a criminal — but he was right! From then on they worked on the preparations together. They would have long talks on what they would do and how they would do it. David drew maps on graph paper, and sometimes he and George would climb to the highest spot available by the roadside at the day's end, to puzzle out once again the defenses of the Median.

"Don't tell your mother about this," George would say. "You know she doesn't understand."

Each morning, before they had gone very far at all, David's father would stop the car and let David out at a bus stop to be picked up by the school bus, and eight hours later the bus would let him out again some hundreds of miles farther west, and soon his parents would be there to pick him up, if they were not there already when he got off with the other kids. More than once David overheard drivers at the camps in the evening complaining about how having kids really slowed a man down in his career, so he'd never get as far as he would have if he'd had the sense to stay single. Whenever some young man whined about waiting around half his life for a school bus, George Baker would only light another cigarette and be very quiet.

In school David learned about the principles of the internal combustion engine. Internal Combustion was his favorite class. Other boys and girls would shoot paperclips at each other over the back seats of the bus, or fall asleep staring out the windows, but David sat in a middle seat (he would not move to the front and be accused of being teacher's pet) and for the most part, paid good attention. His favorite textbook was one they used both in history and social studies; it had a blue cloth cover, the pages scrawled on and dog-eared. The title, pressed into the cover in faded yellow, was *Heroes of the Roads*. On the bus, during recess, David and the other boys argued about who was the greatest driver of them all.

To most of them Alan "Lucky" Totter was the only driver. He'd made 10,220,796 miles when he tried to pass that Winnebago on the right at 85 miles per hour in a blinding snowstorm. Some people thought that showed a lack of judgment, but Lucky Totter didn't give a damn for judgment, or anything else. Totter was the classic lone-wolf driver. Born to re-

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spectable middle-class parents who drove a Buick with holes in its sides, Totter devoured all he could find out about cars. At the age of 13 he deserted his parents at a rest stop at mile 1.375×10^{25}, hot-wired a hopped-up Buggatti-Smith which the owner had left unlocked and made 8,000 miles before the Trooperbots brought him to justice. After six months in the paddy wagon he came out with a new resolve, worked for a month at a service station at jobs even the androids would shun, getting nowhere. At the end of that time he'd rebuilt a serviceable Whippet roadster and was on his way, hell bent for leather. Every extra mile he could squeeze out of his many hot cars he squeezed, and every mile he drove he plowed back into financing a newer and faster car. Tirelessly, it seemed, Totter kept his two-tones to the floorboards, and the pavement fairly flew beneath his wheels. No time for a wife or family, 1,000 miles a day was his only satisfaction, other than the quick comforts of any of the fast women he might pick up who wanted a chance to say they'd been for a ride with Lucky Totter. The solitary male to the end, it was a style guaranteed to earn him the hero-worship of boys all along the world.

But Totter was not the all-time mileage champion. That pinnacle of glory was held by Charles Van Huyser, at a seemingly unassailable 11,315,201 miles. It was hard to see how anyone could do better, for Van Huyser was the driver who had everything: good reflexes, a keen eye, iron constitution, wherewithal, and devilish good looks. He was a child of the privileged classes, scion of the famous Van Huyser drivers, and had enjoyed all the advantages the boys on a middle-lane bus like David's would never see. His father had been one of the premier drivers of his generation and had made more than seven million miles himself, placing him a respectable twelfth on the all-time list. Van Huyser rode the most exclusive of preparatory buses and was outfitted from the beginning with the best made-to-order Mercedes that android hands could fashion. He was in a lane by himself. Old-timers would tell stories of the time they had been passed by the Van Huyser limo and the distinguished, immaculately tailored man who sat behind the wheel. Perhaps he had even tipped his homburg as he flashed by. Spartan in his daily regimen, invariably kind, if a little condescending, to lesser drivers, he never forgot his position in society, and died at the respectable age of 86, peacefully, in the private washroom of the Drivers' Club Dining Room at mile 1.375×10^{25}.

There were scores of others in *Heroes of the Roads*, all of their stories inspiring, challenging, even puzzling. There was Ailene Stanford, at six-million-plus miles the greatest female driver ever, carmaker and mother and credit to her sex. And Reuben Jefferson, and the Kosciusco brothers, and

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the mysterious eastern trance driving of Akiro Tedeki. The chapter "Detours" held frightening tales of abject failure — and of those who had wasted their substance and their lives trying to cross the Median.

"You can't believe everything you read, David," George told him. "They'll tell you Steve Macready was a great man."

It was like George Baker to make statements like that to David and then never explain what he meant. It got on David's nerves sometimes, though he figured his dad did it because he had more important things on his mind.

But Steve Macready was David's personal favorite of the drivers he'd read about. Macready was third on the all-time list behind Van Huyser and Totter, at 8,444,892 miles. Macready hadn't had the advantages of Van Huyser, and he scorned the reckless irresponsibility of Totter. He was an average man, to all intents and purposes, and he showed just how much an average guy could do if he had the will power and nothing more. Born into an impoverished hundred-mile-a-day family that couldn't seem to keep a car on the road three days in a row before it broke down, one of eight brothers and sisters, Macready studied quietly when he could, watched the ways of the road with an intelligent and unflagging eye, and helped his father and mother try to keep the family rolling. Compelled to leave school early because the family couldn't keep up with the slowest of regular school buses, he worked on his own, managed to get hold of an old junker that he put on the road, and set off at the age of 16, taking two of his sisters with him. In those first years his mileage totals were anything but spectacular. But he kept plugging away, four to six hundred miles a day, then seven when he could move to a newer used car, taking care of his sisters, seeing them married off to two respectable young drivers along the way, never hurrying. At the comparatively late age of 30 he married a simple girl from a family of Ford owners and fathered four children. He saw to his boys' educations. He drove on, making a steady 500 miles a day, and 200 on each Saturday and Sunday. He did not push himself or his machine; he did not lag behind. Steadiness was his watchword. His sons grew up to be fine drivers themselves, always ready to lend the helping hand to the unfortunate motorist. When he died at the age of 82, survived by his wife, children, eighteen grandchildren and twenty-six great-grandchildren, drivers all, he had become something of a legend in his own quiet time. Steve Macready.

George Baker never said much when David talked about the arguments the kids had over Macready and the other drivers. When he talked about his own upbringing, he would give only the most tantalizing hints of the many cars he had driven before he picked up Polly, of the many places

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he'd stopped and people he'd ridden with. David's grandfather had been something of an inventor, he gathered, and had modified his pickup with an extra-large tank and a small, efficient engine to get the most mileage for his driving time. George didn't say much about his mother or brothers, though he said some things that indicated that his father's plans for big miles never panned out, for some undisclosed reason, and about how it was not always pleasant to ride in the back of an open pickup with three brothers and a sick mother.

Eventually David saw that the miles were taking something out of his father. George Baker conversed less with Polly and the kids, and talked more at them.

Once in a heavy rainstorm after three days of rolling hill country, forests that encroached on the very edges of the pavement and fell like a dark wall between Westbound and forgotten Eastbound, the front end of the Nash had jumped suddenly into a mad vibration that jerked them two lanes over and set up a loud knocking that threw David's heart into his throat.

"George!" Polly shouted, and George hunched up over the wheel, trying to slow down and steer the bucking car to the roadside. "Shut up!" he yelled.

And they were stopped, and breathing heavily, and the only sound was the drumming of the rain, the ticking of the car as it settled into motionlessness, and the hissing of the cars that still sped by them over the wet pavement. David's father, slow and bearlike, opened the door and pulled himself out of the car. David got out too. Under the hood they saw where the rewelded wheel well had given way, and the shock was ripping through the metal.

"Shit!" George said.

As they stood there a gunmetal-gray Mercedes pulled over to stop behind them, its flashing amber signal warm as fire under the leaden skies and overhanging trees. A stocky man in a leather raincoat got out.

"Perhaps I can help you?" he asked.

George Baker stared at him for a good ten seconds. He looked back at the Mercedes, looked at the man again.

"No, thank you," he said very coldly.

The man hesitated a moment, then turned, went back to his car, and drove off.

So they had to wait three hours in the broken-down Nash as darkness fell and George trudged off down the highway for the next rest stop or until he was picked up by a cruising repair truck. He returned with an android serviceman and they were towed to the nearest station. David, never patient at his best, grew more and more angry. His father offered not a word of explanation, and his mother tried to keep David from getting after him about his stupid refusal of help. But David finally challenged George on the plain stu-

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pidity of his action, which would mystify any sensible driver.

At first George acted as if he didn't hear David. Then he exploded.

"Don't tell me about sensible drivers! I don't need it, David! Don't tell me about your Van Huysers, and don't give me any of that Steve Macready crap either. Your Van Huysers never did anything for the common driving man, despite all their extra miles. Nobody gives it away. That's just the way this road works."

"What *about* Macready?" David asked. He didn't understand what his father was talking about. You didn't have to run someone else down in order to be right. "Look what Macready did."

"You don't know what you're talking about," George said. "You get older but you still think like a kid. Macready sucked up to every tinman on the road. I wouldn't stoop so low as that. Half the time he let his *wife* drive! They don't tell you about that in that damn school, *do* they?

"Wake up and look at this road the way it *is*, David. People will use you like a chamois if you don't. Take my word for it. *Damn* it! If I could just get a couple of good months out of this heap and get back on my feet. A couple of good months!" He laughed scornfully.

It was no good arguing with George when he was in that mood. David shut up, inwardly fuming.

"Follow the herd!" George was shouting now. "That's all people ever do. Never had an original thought in their life."

"George, you don't need to shout at the boy," Polly said timidly.

"Shout! I'm not shouting!" he shouted. George looked at her as if she were a hitchhiker. "Why don't you shut up. The boy and I were just having an intelligent conversation. A fat lot you know about it." His hands gripped the wheel as if he meant to grind it into powder. A deadly silence ensued.

"I need to stop," he said a couple of miles later, pulling off the road into a bar and grill.

They sat in the silent car, ears ringing.

"I'm hungry," Caroline said.

"Let's get something to eat, then." Polly seemed to leap at the opportunity to do something normal. "Come on, David. Let's go in."

"You go ahead. I'll be in in a minute."

After they left, David stared out the car window for a while. He reached under the seat and took out the notebook, which he had moved there a long time before. The spine was almost broken through now, with some of the leaves loose and water-stained. The paper was worn with writing and rewriting to the point where it felt like parchment. David leafed idly through the sketches of watchtowers, the maps, the calculations. In the margin of page six his father had written, in handwrit-

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ing so faded now that it was like the pale voice of years, asking from very far away, "What purpose?"

David was sixteen. His knees were crowded by the back of the car's front seat, and he stared sullenly out the window at the rolling countryside and the gathering night. Caroline, having just completed her fight with him with a belligerent "oh, *yeah!*" was leaning forward, her forearms flat against the top of the front seat, her chin resting on them as she stared grimly ahead. Polly near-sightedly was knitting a cover for the box of kleenex that rested on the dashboard, muffling the radio speaker.

"I'm tired," George said. "I'm going to stop here for a quick one." He pulled the ancient Nash over into the exit lane, downshifted, and the car lurched forward more slowly, the engine rattling loudly in protest of the increased rpm's. David could have done better himself.

They pulled into the parking lot of Fast Ed's Bar and Grill. "You go back and order a fish fry," George said, slamming the car door and turning his back to them. Polly put aside the knitting, picked up her purse and took them in the side door to the cheap dining room. There was no one else there, but they could hear the TV and the loud conversation from the bar up front. After a while a waitress robot rolled back to them. Its porcelain finish was chipped and the hands were stained rusty brown, like an old bathtub.

They ordered, the food came, and they ate. Still George did not return from the bar.

"Go get your father, David," his mother said. He knew she was mad.

"I'll go, ma," Caroline said.

"Stay still! It's bad enough he takes us to his gin mills, without you becoming the drunkard's pet. Go ahead, David."

David went to the barroom. His father was sitting at the far end of the bar, near the front windows that faced the highway. The late afternoon sun gleamed along the polished wood, glinted harshly from the bottles racked on the shelves behind it, turned the mirror against the wall and the brass spigots of the beer taps into fire. George Baker was talking loudly with two other middle-aged drivers. His legs looked amazingly scrawny as he perched on the stool. Suddenly David was very angry.

"Are you going to come and eat?" he demanded loudly.

George turned clumsily to him, his sloppy good humor stiffening to ire.

"What do you want?"

"We're eating. Mom's waiting."

He leaned over to the man on the next stool. "See what I mean?" he said lowly. To David he said, much more boldly, "Go and eat. I'm not hungry." He picked up his shot, downed it in one swallow, and took another draw on the beer setup.

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Rage and humiliation burned in David. He did not recognize the man at the bar as his father — and then, in a realization that made him shudder, he did.

"Are you coming?" David could hardly speak for the anger. The other men at the bar were quiet now. Only the television continued to babble.

"Go away," his father said.

David wanted to kick over the stool and see the man sprawled on the floor. Instead he turned and walked stiffly back to the dining room, past the table where his mother and sister sat, and tore out to the lot, slamming the screen door behind him. He stood looking at the beat-up Nash in the red and white light of Fast Ed's sign. The sign buzzed with electricity, and night was coming, and clouds of insects swarmed around the neon in the darkness. A hundred yards away, on the highway, the drivers had their lights on, fanning before them. The air smelled of exhaust.

He couldn't go back into the bar. He would never step back into a place like that again. The world seemed all at once immensely old, immensely cheap, immensely tawdry. David looked over his shoulder at the vast and empty woods that started just beyond the back of Fast Ed's. Then he walked to the front of the lot and stared across the highway toward the faraway lights that marked Eastbound. How very far away that seemed.

David went back to the car and got the pack out of the trunk. He stepped over the rail at the edge of the lot, crossed the gully beside the road, and waiting for his chance, dashed across the twelve lanes of Westbound to the Median. A hundred yards ahead of him lay the beginnings of no-man's land. Beyond that, where those distant lights swept by in their retrograde motion — what?

But he would never get into a car with George Baker again.

There were three levels of defenses between Westbound and Eastbound — or so they had surmised, and even his high school civics book had agreed. The first was biological, the second was mechanical, and the third and most important, psychological.

As David moved farther from the highway, the ground, which was more or less level near the shoulders, grew broken and uneven. The field was unmowed, thick with nettles and coarse grass, and in the increasing darkness he stumbled more than once. Because the land sloped gradually downward as he advanced, the lights far ahead of him became obscured by the foliage and fences.

He thought once or twice he could hear his name called above the faint rushing of the cars behind him, but when he turned he could see nothing but Westbound. It seemed remarkably far away already. His progress became much slower. He knew there were snakes and worse in the open fields.

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The mines could not be far ahead. He could be in the minefield at that very moment.

He stopped, heart racing. Suddenly he *knew* he was in a minefield, and his next step would blow him to pieces. He saw the shadow of the first line of barbed wire ahead of him, and for the first time he thought he might go back. But the thought of his father and his helpless mother stopped him. They would be glad to take him back, and smother him.

David crouched, swung the pack from his shoulder and took out the foot-long metal detector. Sweeping it a few inches above the ground in front of him, he crawled forward on his hands and knees. It was slow going. There was something funny about the air: he didn't smell anything but field and earth — no people, no rubber, no gasoline. He eyed the nearest watchtower, where he knew searchbeams fanned across the Median and the automatic rifles nosed about incuriously. Whenever the tiny light in his palm went red, David slid slowly to one side or the other and went on. Once he had to flatten himself suddenly to the earth as some object — animal or search mech — rustled through the dry grass not ten yards away. He waited for the bullet in his neck.

He came to the first line of barbed wire. It was rusty and overgrown with weeds; so long had it been out there, untouched, that it had become a part of the ground itself. Weeds had made it a trellis, and when David clipped through the wire with his clippers, the overgrowth held the gap closed. He had to tear the opening wider with his hands, and the cheap workgloves he wore were next to no protection. He ripped himself up some.

He lay in the dark, sweating. He would never last at this rate. He decided to take the chance of moving ahead in short, crouching runs, ignoring mines. For a while it seemed to ease the pressure, until his foot hit and slipped on some metal object and he leapt away, shouting aloud, waiting for the blast that didn't come. Nothing. Crouched in the grass, panting, he saw he had stepped on a hubcap.

David began to wonder why the machines hadn't spotted him yet. He was far beyond the point any right-thinking passenger or driver might pass. Then he realized that he could hear nothing of either Westbound or Eastbound. He had no idea how long it had been since he'd left the parking lot, but the gibbous moon was coming down through the clouds. David wondered what Polly had done after he'd taken the pack and left; he could imagine George's drunken amazement as she told him. Maybe even Caroline had been quiet. He was far beyond them now. He was getting away, amazed at how easy it was, once you made up your mind, amazed at how few had had the guts to try it — if they'd told him the truth.

A perverse idea came to him: may-

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be the teachers and drivers, like sheep huddled in their trailer beds, had never tried to see what lay in the Median. Maybe all the servo-defenses had rotted into ineffectuality like the rusted barbed wire, and it was only the pressure of their dead traditions that kept people glued to their westward course. Suddenly twelve lanes, that had seemed a whole world to him all his life, shrank to the merest thread. Who could say what Eastbound might be? Who could predict how much better men had done for themselves there — and maybe it was the Eastbounders who had built the roads, who had created the defenses and myths that kept them all penned in filthy Nashes, rolling West.

David laughed aloud. He stood up. He slung the pack over his shoulder again, and this time boldly struck out for the new world.

"Halt!"

A figure stood erect before him, a blinding light shone from its head. The confidence drained from David instantly; he dropped to the ground.

"Please stand." David was pinned in the center of the searchbeam. He reached into the knapsack and felt for the revolver.

"This is a restricted area, intruder," the machine said. "Please return to your assigned role."

David blinked in the glare of the light. He could see nothing of the thing's form.

"Role?" he asked.

"I am sure that the first thing they taught you was that entry into this area is forbidden. Am I right?"

"What?" David had never heard this kind of talk from a machine.

"Your elders have said that you should not come here. That is one very good reason why you should not be here — I'm sure you'll agree. The requests of the society which, in a significant way, created us, if not unreasonable, ought to be given considerable thought before we reject them. This is the result of evolution. The men and women who went before you had to concern themselves with survival in order to live long enough to bear the children who eventualy *became* the present. Their rules are engineering-tested. Such experience, let alone your intelligence working *within* the framework of evolution, ought not to be lightly discarded. We are not born into a vacuum. Am I right?"

David wasn't sure the gun was going to do him any good.

"I guess so. I never thought about it."

"Precisely. Think about it."

David thought. "Wait a minute! How do I know *people* made the rules? I don't have any proof. I never see people making rules now."

"On the contrary, intruder, you see it every day. Every act a person performs is an act of definition. We create what we are from moment to moment in our lives — the future before us is merely the emptiness of time which

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does not exist without events to fill it. The greatest of changes is possible: in theory you are just as likely to turn into an aimless collection of molecules in this next instant as you are to remain a human being. That is, unless you believe that men and women are fated and possess no free will...."

"People have free will." David knew that, if he knew anything. "And they ought to use it."

"That's right." The machine's light was as steady as that of the sun. "You wouldn't be in a forbidden area if people did not have free will. You yourself, intruder, are the example of mankind's freedom."

"So let me go by —"

"So we have established that human beings have free will. We will assume that they follow rules. Now, having free will, and assuming that by some mischance one of these rules is distasteful to them — we leave aside for the moment *who made* the rule — then one would expect people to disobey it. They need not have an active purpose to disobey; in the course of a long enough period of time many people will break this burdensome rule for the best — or worst — of reasons. The more unacceptable the rule, the greater the number of people who will discard it at one time or another. They will, as individuals or groups, consciously or unconsciously, create a *new* rule. This is change by human volition. *So*, even if the rules were not originated by man, in time change would ensue given the merits of 'the system,' as we may call it, and the system would *become* person-created. My earlier evolutionary argument then follows as the night the day. Am I right?" If a robot could sound triumphant, this one did.

"Ah —"

"So one good reason for doing what you're told to do is that you have free will. Another good reason is God."

"God?"

"The Supreme Being, the Life Force, that ineluctable, undefinable spiritual presence that lies — or perhaps lurks — within the substance of things, the Holy Father, the First —"

"What about him?"

"God doesn't want you to cross the Median."

"What!"

"Have you ever seen an automobile accident?"

The robot was going too fast, and the light was making it hard for David to think. He closed his eyes and tried to fight back.

"Everybody's seen accidents. People get killed. Don't go telling me God killed them because they did something wrong —"

"Don't be absurd!" The robot said scornfully. "You must try to stretch your mind; this is not some game we're playing, intruder. This is real life. Not only do actions have consequences, but consequences are pregnant with Meaning.

"In the auto accident, we have a pe-

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culiar sequence of events. The physicist tells us that heat and vibration cause a weakening of the molecular bonds between certain long-chain hydrocarbons which comprise the substance of the left front tire of a car traveling at 100 miles per hour. The tire blows. As a result of the sudden increase in friction and change in the moment of inertia of this wheel, certain complex, analyzable oscillations occur. The car swerves to the left, rolls over six times, tossing its three passengers, a man and two women, about like tomatoes in a blender, and collides with a bridge abutment, bursting into flame. To the scientist, this is a simple cause-and-effect chain. The accident has a rational explanation: the tire blew."

David felt slightly queasy. He had forgotten about the gun.

"You see right away what's wrong with this 'explanation.' It explains nothing. We know the rational explanation is inadequate without having to be able to say how we know. Such knowledge is the doing of God. God and His merciful Providence provide the purpose behind the fact of our existence, and is it possible to believe that a sparrow can fall without His holy Cognizance and Will?"

"I don't believe in God."

"What does that matter, intruder?" The thing's voice now oozed mild and angellic understanding. "Need you believe in gravity for it to be an inescapable fact of your existence? God does not demand your belief; He requests that you, of your own inviolate free will and through the undeserved gift of His Grace, come to acknowledge and obey Him. Who can understand the mysteries of faith? Certainly not I, a humble mechanism. Knowledge is what matters, and if you open yourself to the currents that flow through the interstices of the material and immaterial universe, that knowledge will be vouchsafed *you*, intruder. You do not belong here. God knows who you are, and He saw what you did. Am I right?"

David felt confused and sick. But he was getting mad, and he wanted to get away.

"What has this got to do with car accidents?" he demanded.

"The automobile accident does not occur without the knowledge and permission of the Lord. This doesn't mean that He is responsible for it. He accepts the responsibility without accepting the Responsibility. This is a mystery."

"Bullshit."

"Where were you when He laid the asphalt of Westbound? Tell me that. Who set up the mileage markers, and who painted the line upon it? On what foundation was its reinforced concrete sunk, and who made the komfy kabins, when the morning stars sang together, and all the droids and servos shouted for joy?"

It was his chance. The machine was still motionless, its mad light trained on him. A mist had sprung from the no-man's land — poison gas? He had no gas mask; speed was his only hope.

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He couldn't move. He hefted the gun in his hand. He felt dizzy and a little numb, steeling himself to move. He had to be stronger than the robot! It was just a machine!

"So that is the second good reason why you should not proceed with your ill-advised adventure," it droned on. "God is telling you to do back."

Eyes of God. Eyes of the rifles. He had to go! Now! Still he couldn't move. The fog grew, and its smell was strangely pungent. Once past the robot, who knew what ... he ... could find. But the machine's voice exuded metallic self-confidence.

"A third and final good reason why you should return to your assigned role, intruder, is this:

"If you take another step, I will kill you."

David woke. He was cold, and he was being held tightly and shaken by a sobbing man. It was his father.

"Not responsible! Park and lock it!" For the first time in as long as he could remember, David actually heard the crying of the lightposts in the parking lot. He struggled to sit up. His mouth tasted like a thousand miles of road grime.

George Baker held his shoulders and looked into his face. He didn't say anything. He stood up and went to stand by the car. Shakily, he lit a cigarette. David's mother crouched over him. "David, David ... are you all right?"

"What happened?"

"Your father went after you. We didn't know what happened and I was so afraid I'd lose both of you — and then he came back carrying you in his arms."

"Carrying me! That's ridiculous!" George wasn't capable of carrying a wheel hub fifty yards. David looked at the pot-bellied man leaning against the front fender of their car. His father was staring off across the sparsely populated lot. Suddenly David was very ashamed of himself. He didn't know what it was in his chest striving to express itself, but sitting there in the parking lot at mile 1.375×10^{25}, looking at the middle-aged man who was his father, he began to cry.

George never said a word to David after that day about how he had managed to follow his son into the no-man's land of the Median, about what a struggle it must have been to make himself do that, about how and where he had found the boy, and how he had managed to bring him back, or about what it had all meant to him. David never told his father about the robot and what it had said. It all seemed a little unreal to him. The boy who had stood there, desperately trying to get somewhere else, and the words the robot had spoken all seemed terribly remote, as if the whole incident were something he had read about. It was a fantasy that could not have occurred in the real world of pavement and gasoline.

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The father and the son did not speak about it. They didn't say much of anything at first, as they tentatively felt out the boundaries of what seemed to be a new relationship. Even Caroline seemed to recognize that a change had taken place, and she didn't taunt David the way she had before. Unstated, but there was the fact that David was no longer a boy.

A month later and many thousand miles farther along, George Baker, with nervous casualness, broached the subject of buying David a car. It was a shock for David to hear that, and he knew they could hardly afford it, but he also knew there was a rightness to it. And so they found themselves in the lot of Gears MacDougal's New and Used Autos.

George was being too loud, too jocular. "How about this Chevy, David? A Chevy's a good driving man's car." He suddenly looked embarrassed.

David got down and felt a tire. "She's got good rubber on her."

The salesdroid was rolling up to greet them as George opened the hood of the Chevy. "Looks pretty clean," he said.

"They clean them all up."

"They sure do. You can't trust them as far as you'd ... ah, hello."

"Good morning," the droid said, coming to rest beside them. "That's just the little thing for you. One owner, and between you and me, he didn't drive her too hard. He wasn't much of a driver."

George looked at the machine soberly. "Is that so."

"That is so, sir."

"My sons's buying this car, not me." George said suddenly, in a louder voice, as if shaking away the dust of his thoughts. "You should talk to him. And don't try to put anything over on him; he knows his stuff and ... well, you just talk to him, not me, see?"

"Certainly, sir." The droid rolled between them and told David about the Chevy's V-8. David hardly listened. He watched his father step quietly to the side and light another of his cigarettes. George stood with Polly and Caroline and looked ill at ease and quieter than David could ever remember seeing him. The robot took David around the car, pointing out its extras, and it came to David just what his father was: not a strong man, not a particularly special man, not a particularly intelligent man. He was the same man he had been when David had sat on his lap years before, he was the same man who had taken him on his strolls around the rest stops so many times, he was the drunk who had slouched on the stool in Fast Ed's. He was a good driving man.

"I'll take it," David said, breaking off the sales droid in midsentence.

"Righto," the machine said, its hard smile unvarying. It did not miss a beat. Within seconds a hard copy of the title had emerged from the slot in its chest. Within minutes the papers had been signed, the mileage validated and sub-

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tracted from George Baker's yearly total, and David stood beside his car. It was not a very good car to start out with, but many had started with less, and it was the best his father could do. Polly hugged him and cried. Caroline reached up and kissed him on the cheek; she cried too. George shook his hand and did not seem to want to let go.

"Remember now, take it easy for the first thousand or so, till you get the feel of her. Check the oil, see if it burns oil. I don't think it will. It's got a good spare, doesn't it?"

"It does, Dad."

"Good. That's good." He stood silent for a moment, looking up at his son. The sun was bright, and the light breeze disarrayed the thinning hair he had combed over his bald spot. "Goodbye, David. Maybe we'll see you on the road?"

"Sure you will."

David got into the Chevy and turned the key in the ignition. The motor started immediately and breathed its low and steady rumble. The seat was very hot against David's back. The windshield was spotless, and beyond the nose of the car stretched the access ramp to Westbound, swarming now with the cars that were moving while they dawdled there still. David put the car in gear, stepped slowly on the accelerator, let out the clutch, and moved smoothly down the ramp, gathering speed. He shifted up then, moving faster now, and then quickly once again. The force of the wind streaming in through the driver's side window increased from a breeze to a gale, and its sound became a continuous buffeting as it whipped his hair about his ear. Flicking the turn signal, David merged into the flow of traffic, the sunlight flashing off the hood ornament that lead him on toward the distant horizon, just out of his reach, but attainable he knew, as he pressed his foot to the accelerator, hurrying on past mile 1.375×10^{25}.

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Michael Ward's first F&SF story concerns an experiment to project volunteers to a fantasy landscape that turns out to be real enough so that some men do not return. Mr. Ward lives in Baton Rouge and reports that he recently got married and took on a new job in advertising.

One Way Ticket To Elsewhere

BY

MICHAEL WARD

Langley leaned over his desk toward me. The plastic badge clipped to his lapel momentarily caught the light and flashed it in my eyes. I was wearing a similar badge, only where his had his picture, mine had the word *temporary*. He said, "The first thing I'm going to tell you is these are not fantasies." He paused to await a reaction. I let him sit there two or three seconds, until he started to radiate the chill of death, then raised my eyebrows at him. This wasn't quite enough to suit, but he had his speech ready, so he went on anyway. "I mean it. The project may be officially designated Computer Interface Projected Fantasy Landscape Research, but that landscape's real. In the project, here, we call it Elsewhere. Going Elsewhere. And if you've gone Elsewhere and you walk up to some twelve-foot-tall demon with big sharp teeth, and that demon smiles and bends over you and bites your head off, *you don't come back*."

"I understand that," I told him. "I want to see Kraus, now."

"I haven't finished with you yet, mister."

I stood up. "You can tell me the rest on the way."

We walked down carpeted corridors lined with closed, uninformatively numbered doors of blond wood, descended on two different elevators, then walked some more. Langley didn't really have anything else to say. He just wanted to make sure, without actually putting it into words, that I understood the pecking order: I was a newcomer and I was at the bottom. Langley, I knew, was a former astronaut — one unspectacular flight before they closed down the program — and,

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to judge by the debris of prep school left in his accent, had gotten there by way of Annapolis and Navy flight test. He wasn't about to let all that manhood go to waste.

We came to a guard at a desk who looked up from *Newsweek* just long enough to initial where Langley signed us both in. We passed, went down a hall.

I had followed the space program, while we still had one, and I remembered a publicity photo of Langley standing, suited and grinning, outside the shuttle trainer. He had just performed some kind of maneuver previously thought impossible. He'd had a reputation as a tom-catter and a rule-bender. I said, "I've got an idea you wouldn't have taken this security rigmarole so seriously while you were still with NASA."

He was walking ahead of me. He stopped. I stopped too, still behind him. I saw his shoulders rise with tension. He said very quietly to the empty hall ahead of him, "Fuck NASA." And then he walked on.

We passed somebody in a white lab coat, hands in her pockets, Somebody else carrying a clipboard.

Langley held a door open for me. He managed to make it a contemptuous gesture.

Inside the room another Lab Coat sat at a console consisting of three CRTs and two keyboards. She was leaning back in her swivel chair, idly and unnecessarily tapping a cigarette on the rim of a crowded ashtray between the two keyboards.

"Any changes?" Langley asked her.

"No, sir."

One CRT held a vital-signs display — quiet, somebody very relaxed or maybe asleep. The other two displayed grids of numbers.

"Don't you know there's no smoking in here?"

"Yes, sir."

The back of the room was curtained off. I walked over to it, said, "In here?"

"Yes," Langley said. "Then put out that cigarette."

"Yes, sir."

I pulled the curtain open. Kraus lay there on a couch. He looked asleep. A tube from an I.V. bottle led to the inside of one elbow.

I heard Langley come up behind me. "Well, mister, see what you wanted?"

I looked at Kraus lying there so peacefully. Someone had just shaved him — the gear was on a rolling stand next to the couch. I looked at his close-cropped head — his cleanly shaved face was almost lineless — resting on a small pillow like a baby's pillow. "I guess I just wanted to see what I was getting into."

Langley pointed to one of the CRTs. "Okay, what we have here—"

"Is a vital-signs display."

He gave me the Look. "Right. Normally, when somebody loses it," he in-

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dicated one of the scan lines, "we get a null cerebral function. Classic brain-death." Quaint way to put it. *Loses it.* His hand moved to the next CRT, drew a circle encompassing the grid of numbers. "All these become zero, or nearly so. You see, each position in the matrix, here, refers to some element in the landscape, Elsewhere."

"Does any of this have a use? Aside from telling whether or not somebody's dead."

"It's data," he said with a touch of defensiveness, "for analysis and collation. All this will be integrated with the subject's debriefing, afterwards."

"I mean the project itself. What's the rationale behind it's existence?"

"Pure research doesn't need a justification."

"Of course," I said. "But surely you don't put that on your grant proposals." He certainly was touchy.

"No." As Langley spoke he gave me a withering look, as only an officer and a gentleman can, that told me without ambiguity to mind my p's and q's, mister. "We expect to make some rather spectacular strides within the mental-health field, for example."

I had little interest in poking holes in his source of bread and butter and self-esteem. So I gave him a convincing, thoughtful nod and let it go.

"At any rate, during a normal session, all these are in constant flux as the subject perceives and or interacts with them. As you can see, these are fairly stable."

"Unusual."

"Right. And this..." He pointed to a number that, among all the others, looked quite undistinguished, except...

"Zero," I said.

"Right." Oh, he was having a great time, now. I was giving the right responses at the right times. The Lab Coat looked as if she were five dollars short of being able to hire a demon to bite Langley's head off. As he went on to say, "And what this represents, specifically—" I shook out cigarettes for her and myself, lit them, "—in that landscape, is the ego."

I looked at him. "Ego?"

"The choice-making self. The *I*." His tone would have been more appropriate to a quiet "Fuck you."

"But if the self is gone," I said, "the landscape ... would collapse. Right? So where is it?"

"You tell me," he said.

Langley showed me to my room. He had certainly taken a quick dislike to me — and I would have to admit, first, that I had done little to discourage it and, second, that the reaction was reciprocal. This didn't bother me much. I had assessed him from the start as the kind of man who didn't like people; he respected them — and was incapable of respecting anyone but a superior or a subordinate.

The room was like a Holiday Inn with anemia. I unpacked my change of clothes and my toilet kit and my Travalarm and the rest.

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On the way up, Langley had pointed out the cafeteria. Tomorrow, I would go out and get a decent meal. Tonight, I wanted to check out the program participants. Serving time was between five and six-thirty, and I had a vague recollection that the food in such places was better earlier. It was now a few minutes after five, so — in this uncivilized hour — I took me down.

They told me the stuff on my plate was food. I took them at their word ... but let it go.

The participants did not sit with the Lab Coats — there was a demilitarized zone of an aisleway between them. I sat at a vacant spot at the participants' table. They looked at me with silent suspicion for so long that I said, "Is this seat being saved for somebody or what?"

The one sitting across from me, a heavy-set guy, about thirty, blond hair, very thin on top, said, "You must be the guy they brought in about Kraus."

"That's right. What's your name?"

"Anderson."

So I told him mine, and we shook hands, but as a gesture I didn't think it meant much to him. I said, "I can't help noticing the segregated seating," and nodded at the Lab Coats.

"Shit," Anderson said. "They don't know what's goin' on. They don't understand."

The man sitting on my left gave a brief, high-pitched laugh, then leaned forward, knife in one hand, fork in the other, and said to me, "Listen, have you ever done it? Gone into computer interface projected fantasy landscape?"

"Gone Elsewhere? No."

Anderson looked displeased with me. I think he disliked an outsider appropriating their language. It didn't seem to bother the other guy, who said, "Well, neither have they. And you don't understand, either."

"Explain it to me. Maybe then I will. And who are you?"

"Jeff. And, no, I won't explain. There are certain *things*, certain aspects of it that you just don't talk about. Because when you *name* one of them, it's like spreading a tarp over a patch of grass: it dies. But you will understand, if you go. Anderson understands."

"I been ten times," Anderson said. He poked a thumb at a man, about forty, sitting next to him. "So's he. She—" he poked the thumb at somebody else, "—seventeen. Jeff here's lost count."

"No kidding?" I said, deadpan, to Jeff. Then, "Okay, so what about Kraus? What do you think happened to him?"

Everybody went back to looking serious and sullen — and scared, I realized.

Anderson said, so low it was almost under his breath, "Some people just can't handle themselves."

That sounded a little uninformative.

"That sounds a little uninforma-

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tive," I said. Also, I suspected, it actually meant *that can't happen to me.*

"Tough," he said.

The guy next to him, the one who'd also gone ten times, said, "Who are you anyhow? Why'd you get called in?"

That sounded a little like an attempt to change the subject.

"Tough," Anderson said, leaning across the table and poking me in the chest with a forefinger that felt like the end of a broom handle.

I curled my lip at him and said, "An expanded vocabulary is an expanded horizon."

"Don't you know?" Jeff said. "Our friend here has quite a reputation in certain circles. Seems he has a talent for finding things. He's the one who found that tactical weapon that was lost in the Mediterranean a couple years ago."

"I remember that," said the guy next to Anderson. "It was in the papers. So, what — do you do salvage work?"

"He just finds things," said Jeff. "Senators. Strange little canisters missing from laboratories...."

"I'll tell you what," I told Jeff, "I don't throw any tarps over your patches of grass; you don't throw any over my vegetable gardens. How does that sound?"

He barked his high-pitched laugh again — like a startled Chihuahua — and said, "You do like your privacy, hey, friend? That's okay. I think we can all understand that."

"Shit," Anderson said.

I went back to my room, having come to the conclusion that the conversation in the cafeteria was hardly more satisfying than the food.

I unwrapped a glass from the bathroom, took it over to the dresser where I'd set my traveling bottle of Hennessey's and poured myself a couple of fingers. Stretched out on the bed with my glass and a cigarette, got up almost immediately and went to the phone.

It took only a moderate amount of belligerence to get what I wanted, and before my cigarette was gone, a messenger came knocking at my door. I signed for the packet, then went back to the bed and did my best to settle in.

The packet held Kraus's dossier. It looked a little thin.

Thirty-one years old. Blond hair. Gray eyes. Scar on left knee as a result of ten-year-old motorcycle accident. No history of alcoholism or other drug abuse.

I was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Jeff.

He had a present for me: a small cellophane envelope containing a blue gelatin cap. He told me to take it at least six hours before I was scheduled to go into interface. The molar circuits needed that long to migrate to their proper receptor sites. It was good for about three days. On the fourth, the transmissions started getting noisy,

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and the signals turned to garbage and then quit altogether.

Smiling like the Cheshire Cat, he backed out the door and closed it.

While a Lab Coat checked the telemetry, Langley asked me if I was comfortable and didn't wait for an answer. I was. After the physical, they had hypnotized me, and now I was so relaxed I could have fallen asleep falling off a cliff, if I'd wanted to.

"I have to go to the bathroom," said Jeff.

Langley didn't think that amusing. Well, neither did I, much, but let it go. We wouldn't be gone that long.

Earlier this morning I had learned through a chance conversation that having an experienced partner along the first time or two was a big help. I'd button-holed Langley, insisted on Jeff, asked why he was going to let me go alone. Seems he thought there was no point.

"Very well," said Langley. "We are ready to commence countdown." I'll bet he got a charge out of saying that. It was probably his idea.

"Close your eyes during countdown," Jeff said. "It makes the transition easier."

"Are you ready?" Langley said, for the ritual not the response.

"Ready," we said, not quite in unison.

I closed my eyes.

"Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... Mark."

I experienced a brief wave of vertigo.

Then I felt normal, except, I realized, that I was now sitting. I opened my eyes and stood.

I was inside an elevator. Jeff stood next to me. "Is this part of it?" I asked him and gestured around me.

"Somewhere in between. Hypnotic implant. Helps ease us in. All set?"

I nodded.

There were only two buttons beside the door. He pressed the one with the arrow pointing down.

I had no sensation of movement. After a couple of seconds, the door rolled open. I don't know what I had expected.

What I saw out there was a human junkyard.

"Come on," Jeff said, and I followed him into it.

Heads, hands, feet, chests, arms, genitalia, things I couldn't identify, and pieces of pieces, all scattered and piled and scattered from toppled piles.

The ground was gray. All those body parts were a slightly darker gray. Underfoot, the ground felt like hard-packed sand. The sky was a writhing, roiling mass of thick, dark (gray) clouds, so low that — combined with the short line of sight through the human junkpiles — I had a feeling of being indoors.

I knelt for a closer look at a hand that lay in the middle of an otherwise clear spot. It had been broken off, diagonally, across the palm. I reached

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out to pick it up, paused, looked at Jeff.

"Go ahead."

It felt like sandstone. The face of the break was featureless. I dropped it and stood.

"Come on," Jeff said.

There was a fairly clear path through this dismemberment's jungle. As we followed it, I noticed that my clothes had not changed in my transition to Elsewhere. I commented on this and asked Jeff if it might be possible to bring other things through. I was thinking of weapons.

"No," he said. "I've tried and they don't go. I think the only reason our clothes do is that they are so much a part of our self-image."

After another moment of silent walking, I was noticing a face — just that, like a mask — resting on the ground, looking like it belonged to someone sinking and it was the last part to go under, its expression one of surrender and sublime contentment, when Jeff remarked that I would probably be treated a little more warmly by the participants after my baptism, here.

"I was wondering when the welcome wagon would call," I told him. "I still haven't received my complimentary doormat."

"We don't need doormats around here. We just use Langley."

I smiled. "And Langley uses the Lab Coats."

"That's right. And the Lab Coats use us. It's a neat arrangement."

We walked for another minute, occasionally stepping over debris that had rolled onto the path, and then came to something new. Jeff stopped me from walking up to it.

We faced a wall — for lack of a better word; it was a vertical plane in our way — that had colors filming its surface like the rainbows on an oil slick. Jeff said, "Okay, what we're going to do is run and jump into it."

"You're kidding," I said. It looked solid.

"No, I'm not." He grinned. "Here, look." He picked up the front third of a foot and underhanded it at the wall. No clunk; it just disappeared into it. "Okay? ... Okay, go."

He dashed, and I dashed after and kept pace with him. He jumped, and I followed.

And hit the wall, flying.

And disappeared.

That's how it felt. All the little aches and pains and miscellaneous sensations that added up to an awareness of myself were gone, just like that — the feel of my hair shaking as I moved, of the perpetual stiffness in my left elbow, of my shorts binding me slightly in the crotch, even of breathing — and what was left was a point, in the Euclidean sense, infinitely small in all dimensions, of awareness moving through some kind of space. I wasn't afraid; my emotions seemed to be gone, too. Then it turned out that all my sensations weren't gone; they were just different. They became something

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I *passed through* rather then *had* or *was*. I passed through blue for a while, then passed through the smell of limes, then sadness, more blue, magenta, then a sensation like immersion in warm soda water...

...And when I passed out of that, I was landing on one foot on the ground, stumbling, falling to one knee, realizing I was back to myself....

I looked up at Jeff, facing me. He bent forward, hit his thighs with both fists, laughing his chihuahua laugh, and shouted, "Isn't that *great?*"

Instead of getting up, I let myself fall onto my back, saying "Yeah," and laughed and immediately banged the back of my head on some jagged anatomical fragment. It hurt like hell. "Oh, shit." And laughed some more, touched the sore spot, looked at my fingertips: red.

"Oh, shit," Jeff said, and he wasn't laughing.

'It's not that—" I began, then fully heard his tone and really looked at him.

Mouth open, he was staring at my fingers.

Suddenly, then, he grabbed my arm. "Up! Come *on*. Get *up*, damnit!"

"What's the matter?"

"Come *on*." With his free hand he was searching his pockets. "Handkerchief!"

"What?" I was up, and he was pulling me along. We were running, and he was yelling about a damn handkerchief.

"Handkerchief, handkerchief! ... Oh, *crap*." He gave up on his pockets, grabbed his sleeve up near the shoulder, yanked, yanked again and tore it all the way off his arm.

And now I was hearing rustling noises all around us. Mostly from behind.

"Here." He pushed the sleeve at me. "Wipe the blood off on this."

"It's not that bad—"

"*Do* it!"

So I did. It slowed me down a bit, and I pushed to catch up with him. "*Okay.*"

"*Give it here.*"

I passed it to him like a baton in a relay.

He wadded it up and abruptly stopped — I passed him — turned and threw it, hard. Then he was running again, and I stopped.

He passed me as I stood watching the things that went for that bloody sleeve.

The ground, the same ground over which we had run, had puckered into many long, thin, wrinkled tubes that waved and probed. Some had come up under piles of body parts, sending them shifting and tumbling. The rag was lost in a rustling, writhing cluster of them. More were growing closer to me.

And another just a few feet away.

"*Hey!*" came Jeff's voice.

I ran.

I caught up with him, and together we ran on through more of the ana-

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tomical junkyard. More rustlings, like the sounds made by a restless sleeper in sweat-dampened sheets, came from behind us, and sometimes the sound of a small avalanche. My heart was racing faster than my feet. I saw that a short distance ahead this terrain ended. There was a white railing marking the border, then nothing: the rail guarded the edge of a cliff. We followed the rail, while I caught glimpses down, way down. There was a river, there, partially masked by mist. It ran through a channel smooth and straight enough to be concrete. I could faintly hear rapids. In a moment we came to a gap in the railing, and through it was the constantly reappearing top step of an escalator.

We made the kind of time a person can make, running down a down-escalator.

After a moment we stopped running, let the escalator carry us, and began to catch up on our breathing. Jeff told me, between breaths, "I'm going to have to travel with you more often."

"Not getting enough excitement all by yourself?"

He shook his head. "When I come here by myself," he thumped the escalator rail with the heel of his hand, "I find a spiral staircase."

"Oh." I looked back at the head of the escalator, fifty feet away. Those wrinkled tubes were poking and waving over the edge. "What would those things have done?"

"Killed you. Other than that, I couldn't say." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I lost a partner to them once. He stepped on something round. Rolled out from under his foot and he fell into a pile of those ... body parts." Jeff wasn't looking at me. He was picking at a flaw in the weave of his pants. "Collapsed on top of him. He wasn't hurt seriously, but he was cut in several places. At that time we didn't know about those tubes, and he just sat there, dusting himself off and complaining about his bruises." He left off with the flaw in his pants and began picking at a shred of skin, perhaps from an old blister, on the palm of one hand. "I was looking at something else, I don't re — yeah, I do; it was an eyeball — when the ground pooched up in about four or five places. I heard him grunt, and I looked around. The tubes had gone straight for the blood, attached themselves to the wounds. He was trying to get free, and I jumped over to help him. We couldn't pull them off. Tried breaking them. Couldn't. He was really scared, and so was I." Jeff turned his hands over, looking at them. "A lot more of the tubes had come up, some hovering, some dipping down to attach themselves. Then I looked up and saw one of them moving toward me ... I jumped back. And then I saw him open his mouth — to scream, I guess — and a whole bunch of them went down his throat. Another one wedged in amongst the bunch. And another. And another .. I heard his jaw pop as

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his mouth was forced open farther than it was supposed to go. That's when I really panicked, and I bolted for the elevator ... Just a few seconds after I made it to the projection room, I saw his death register on the CRT...." He let his hands drop, shook his head. "I should have warned you. It's just that everybody knows about them, and it's been a long time since there's been any trouble with them, and they are *not* a memory I like to dwell on...."

"Forget it," I said. "You thought fast and saved my skin."

He nodded, looked at his hands again, "You know I can still remember how they felt, like chamois," and rubbed his hands on his pants legs.

I felt a shudder that didn't quite make it to the surface.

We were getting close to the bottom of the escalator, now. I looked at the river in its smooth, straight channel. All that I could see was rapids. The roaring grew louder as we got closer.

The channel did look like concrete ... felt like it.

The water's sound was huge.

Jeff cupped his hands around my ear and shouted into them; *"Feel it? Don't get too close to the water."*

I did feel it. Partly, it was mixed in with the rhythms of the white water sound. Partly, the feeling just was. The more I paid attention, the more vivid it became. And whatever it was, it was seductive. It was infectious. It was sinister.

It would have been such a heavenly malignant thing to walk into that water.

"Get closer, carefully," Jeff told me.

I looked at him, and he nodded.

So I edged up to the shoreline. The water lapped higher and harder at the point closest to me. When I got within a few feet, a wave broke and sent up a spout of water which, as I watched, stretched and changed into an arm of water with a *hand* at the end of it, and it bent and fell, caressing my pants leg as it came down, and then flowed back along the ground into the river. And at that moment the roaring water sound seemed to contain a thousand huge sighs. And another wave broke and sent out another reaching arm....

And I backed away from it.

I turned to Jeff, and he said, *"Look at your pants leg, where it tried to feel you up."*

Swatches of cloth were gone, as if dissolved away.

Jeff led me downstream. I had to purposefully choose to walk straight, not curve toward the water.

Shortly, we came to a spot where the river went underground. It just roared into a cave and was gone. The sound quickly diminished as we kept walking. We were soon able to converse with normal effort, and Jeff told me, "I lost a foot to that thing once." He smiled — I guess at my expression. "It grew back."

We continued on. The water's attraction had faded. The cliff face curv-

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ed away from us. More and more sharply. Then, when it was a couple hundred yards distant, it abruptly paralleled us again, ran for a few hundred feet, and ended.

Jeff signaled a stop, brought an index finger to his lips, then pointed with the same finger at the distant cliff face. The terrain between us and the cliff was flat and smooth with a soft looking texture, mottled with tans and beiges. Jeff took a deep breath and gave a piercing whistle.

Waves of vivid color raced away from him, across the plain, and splashed against the cliff in geometric patterns ... which then faded.

He shouted. "To whom it may concern!"

And the waves of red, blue, yellow, green raced out, splashed the cliff and formed ... words.

To whom it may concern.

I looked at Jeff: grinning. Looked at the cliff: fading. I tried it myself.

In the beginning ...: a hundred feet high.

The words faded, and I was about to do an encore, when Jeff stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. He stomped on the ground with one foot.

Fragments of color flashed about the plain. Tremors of color on the cliff, then my words appeared there again. I tried this. *In the beginning* appeared there yet again, just a little decayed around the edges this time.

We played here for a while, flinging words full of color at the cliff face, then Jeff suggested this was enough for one session and that we be getting back. I reluctantly agreed. As we went, I asked him a couple things, starting with: "Just how much is there in this place, Elsewhere?"

"You've seen ... maybe ten percent of what we've explored so far. And I have no way of knowing, but I suspect that what we've explored is only a tiny fraction of all there is. It gets more and more idiosyncratic the farther away from the elevator you get. Maybe there is no limit."

"What about Langley? Does he come here?"

"As far as I know, he only did once. It was in the early part of the program, and we didn't know some of the things we do now. He insisted on coming by himself, I think because he had the idea that his innermost soul would be laid bare to whoever might have gone with him. So anyway, he took a wrong turn somewhere and ended up in some kind of Hieronymus Bosch nightmare-land, and I guess that killed his interest."

By now we were on the escalator, riding up, river safely behind us. It occurred to me that this same escalator had been going down, before. Well, I'd seen stranger things.

Jeff asked, "How's the head? Stopped bleeding?"

And I suddenly remembered what we'd left up there, uneasily checked my cut. "It's stopped."

"Good."

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Topside, there was no sign of the tube things.

Or of the rag.

We followed the path, through the wall, back to the elevator. the door was open. Jeff pressed the UP button. The door closed, and a minute later, opened again. We stepped out.

I realized, then, that I was standing in the middle of the projection-room floor. Jeff stood next to me. There was no elevator behind us.

I was walking back to my room. After a lunch that a roach would have passed over, and after wasting a long afternoon wandering the building, poking my nose wherever that plastic badge permitted, I had decided I would sip my supper. I had seen a lot of things this day. At one point nearly got killed.

I was tired.

Footsteps on Acrolan. Fuzzy shadows cast by fluorescents. Numbered doors. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen a window in the whole damn building. I wanted a little time to sit — in my small, windowless room — and think, Assimilate.

Anderson came around the corner ahead, walked toward me.

I didn't want to talk to him, just then. So I nodded to him, lowered my head and hunched my shoulders into as uncommunicative a posture as I could.

The next thing I knew, I had been slammed up against the wall and pinned there.

Anderson's face, about six inches from mine, was red. Cords stood out in his thick neck. He had me by the front of my shirt with one hand — that elbow was pinning my upper arm — and by the wrist with his other hand. I didn't feel much weight on the soles of my feet. I had a nice bruise on one shoulder blade and several rubbed spots. I was breathing hard. He was breathing hard. I asked him when was the last time he had brushed his teeth.

He pulled me forward and banged me back against the wall again. I felt nasty things in various places.

"You don't talk," he said. "I got something to tell you."

I decided to let him have his air time.

"I don't like you here. You're trespassing outside of your place, mister."

"Wait a second, pal, you don't understand, I think. I don't have anything to do with you. The only reason—"

Slam. Distantly, I thought I heard my mother call my name.

"You don't have nothin' to do with nothin'. I don't like you here. I want you to go. You got me?" I felt him tense up for another slam. "Don't say nothin' but yes or no. You got me?"

I felt my teeth, clamped. Felt myself breathing hard through my nose. I told him yes.

He let me go and walked off down the hall.

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All right. So I'm not Superman. I made my way to my windowless room and had some supper.

Later, while I was working on dessert, Jeff dropped by. He asked if I had a cigarette.

I gave him one, lit another for myself. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

He pulled up the chair. Its legs groaned against the linoleum.

"A couple of things, I guess. Mainly, I wanted to find out what you think about all this."

"I don't think much about it at this point. It's a job. One I've barely gotten any headway on."

"I see. And I'm supposed to respect this professional reserve of yours."

I shrugged.

"LIsten, friend, I'm not a very respectful person." He leaned forward, peering into my glass. "What's that you're drinking?"

I got up, fetched the other glass, poured for him.

He sniffed, smiled and sipped. "That's nice."

"All right, I said, and sat on the edge of the bed. "One thing I think is that you're all scared of something. When I mentioned Kraus at dinner last night — even though you should have been expecting it — everyone at that table, including you, froze like a wino at the sound of breaking glass. And I think you came here to check me out about whatever it is you're afraid of."

I wasn't sure why I didn't mention my business with Anderson. I guess I just wasn't feeling very trustful in general, right then.

Jeff sucked his teeth for a moment, staring at his drink, then abruptly leaned forward, putting elbows on knees. "Listen, we *are* all afraid. We're afraid the project's going to be shut down. Because of this mess with Kraus. You've got to understand that we've found something, here. Something very valuable to us."

I shook my head. "How do you know you've found something?"

"Hey, of course we've found something. It's *there*. What you mean is: 'How do we know we've found something good for us?' And that's off the point. Good by whose standards? The *point is, it is* valuable to *us* right *now*."

I nodded. "Acknowledged. I have no right judging." I swirled my drink, sipped it. "You know, you sound almost mystical about this. Religious."

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I don't believe any of us thinks of it like that. I don't. But I guess you could interpret it that way. If you want to."

I sipped. He sipped. Then I said, "There's been at least one person who died Elsewhere...."

"Two, altogether."

"Well, why should Kraus...."

He was shaking his head. "Different. This project is *considered* dangerous, like flight test, say. The government is prepared for a certain amount

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of deaths. But Kraus isn't dead. The closest analog they can think of is crazy. That scares 'em."

"Okay ... I want you to know I'm not here to close down the program. I have nothing to do with that decision. I'm just here to look for Kraus, wherever he disappeared to inside his head or Elsewhere or whatever." I swallowed the rest of my drink. Jeff finished his. "As a matter of fact, it occurs to me that if I do find him, then your problem is solved, too. More than likely."

Jeff got up and went over to the dresser with his empty glass. I thought he was going to help himself to another drink and readied a remark, but he didn't. He set the glass down and held it down, said, "Okay. I believe you. And agree with your reasoning." He paused, stood still for a moment, then let go of the glass and turned around. "Okay. There's something else I want to tell you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. There's something fishy going on in the project, and Kraus was onto it."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. Let me tell you what I know."

I gave him a cigarette to help him verbalize, gave me one to listen with.

"Kraus came to my room one evening, just a couple days before his ... whatever. Anderson was there, and we had been shooting the shit. Kraus — well, let me explain first that Kraus isn't just a participant, he's also a Lab Coat. Me too, for that matter. Was. I dropped my Lab Coat duties. Kraus didn't. My speciality was psych; Kraus's, computers. Anyway, he came in, sat around moodily for a few minutes, finally said he had run across something peculiar. He had discovered, it seems, that someone had been making unauthorized copies of experimental data."

"Who?"

"He didn't know."

"Did he take this upstairs?"

"I don't think he had at that time. I don't know if he did after we talked. I told him I thought he should. Something like that could have caused enough security to be called down to ruin the project for us. Best, I thought, to get it cleared up as fast as possible. But it's entirely possible he didn't. He could be a stubborn, independent bastard sometimes, and it would have been like him to try and handle this all by himself."

"Is this all you know?"

"Yeah."

"It's not much."

"I know," he said ruefully.

"So somebody was pilfering data, and Kraus found out about it, though he didn't find out who. But you think 'who' found out about Kraus."

"It looks kind of like it, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "You know, Langley didn't say anything to me about this. So Kraus evidently didn't talk to him."

"I guess so. Though maybe he's just

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not saying. I do know he doesn't like having you here and that he's not the one who called you in. That came from higher up."

"Um-hum. Langley seems to take any kind of problem with the program personally.... You know a lot about things having to do with me, don't you. Mind reader?"

He smiled. "No, just a dossier reader. I may not be a Lab Coat anymore, but I still have my connections. I told them that if they let me look at the file, I'd let them use that rectal thermometer they've been waving at me. And, incidentally, you're not going to find anything useful in that one."

I picked up Kraus's folder from the table beside my bed, weighed it in my hand. "I didn't. Pretty innocent-looking document, here, that somebody wanted stamped *closed*.... What about Anderson?"

"Anderson...? Oh. No, Anderson's too loyal to the project. Anyway — and don't tell him I said this — I don't think he's quite bright enough to pull it off." He smiled. "You know, I just heard him tell somebody, 'An expanded vocabulary is an expanded horizon.'" He shook his head.

I snorted. Homilies not-withstanding, I wasn't flattered. I said, "Did *you* take it upstairs?"

'No," he said and looked uncomfortable.

"Why not?"

He sighed. "Well, to tell you the truth, I guess I was hoping it might go away. It's one thing to recommend somebody else take action on something; it's another to take it yourself. I'm not defending that. I don't have to ... but I'do think I would have taken it upstairs before long. I just told you about it."

"You did ... and as I said, I'm not here to judge. And as you said, I have no right to ... so, where are we now...? In the middle of nowhere, it seems. Is there anybody else Kraus might have talked to about this?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say no. But it would only be a guess. Listen, I'm going to go now."

I nodded.

"If you need anything, I'm on 2257."

He left. And left me with some things to think about.

The next morning I went down to the cafeteria for some breakfast. After spending the evening thinking, I hadn't come up with anything about the situation here except that it left a bad taste that Hennessey's didn't cut. Maybe I should have cleared out, as Anderson had recommended. And maybe I didn't because, as Jeff had so delicately mentioned, I had quite a reputation in certain circles, and I didn't want to see a mark in the debit side of their ledgers ... maybe ... the hell with maybes ... let it go.

Anderson had been at breakfast. He had said nothing. Stared at me.

I walked down to the projection

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room. I was still sore, in more ways — as well as places — than one. That head-gimp, Anderson. *You're trespassing outside of your place, mister.* I wondered where he'd picked up that phrase. I doubted he had the intellectual stamina to put it together all by himself. I had an appointment to talk to Langley this evening. It might be best to mention this Anderson business to him. I'd decide later. In the meantime, I had an appointment Elsewhere, alone. The Elsewhere Kraus had disappeared from.

I stood up inside the elevator. I stared at those two buttons beside the door. I raised my hand; I pointed a finger; I pressed the DOWN button.

When the door opened, I stepped out.

About the only difference I noticed, following the path through the anatomical junkyard, from the last time I had passed this way was that the sky, still a low mottling of deep grays, was now almost motionless. And there was something strange about these clouds. I had the feeling, looking up at them, that their placement, their distribution, was not random. That they were arranged to form some kind of obscure pattern, or perhaps a word or words that I couldn't quite make out. It was a disturbing feeling.

I followed the path to the wall and got ready to jump into it. I determined this time not to fall on the other side. I took my jump slower and got myself in a better position to land.

Like the last time, I disappeared.

Then I was passing through a searing, utter despair.

I was out of it, flashing through a moment of deep red; then I was going through it again. An interlude of black, and again despair., And despair ... and despair...

...And I was out, landing on my feet and gasping for breath, and able to feel not only relief but also the desire for relief....

It took a couple minutes before I felt like going on.

I followed the path and felt uneasy, the aftertaste of that despair still with me. I heard a sound as something crumbled away and fell, behind me. I spun.

And saw nothing threatening. One of the anatomical junkpiles had simply toppled, that was all. Pieces had been scattered across the path ... into an almost-pattern ... a word I couldn't quite make out.

I walked on. Came to the white guardrail, then to the escalator, which didn't descend fast enough to suit me — I walked down it. Into the white water's roar. I stayed well away from the river. Mixed in with the sound of it was a roared, hissed, whispered word I couldn't quite make out.

I found myself walking quickly.

Splashed in primary colors across the cliff was a word I couldn't quite make out.

I decided it was time to go back. I'd

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seen enough for my first time in Kraus's landscape. I was already walking — hurrying. No point in wasting any more time here.

I hurried to the escalator, took the steps two at a time. Hurried to the wall, paused, took a deep breath and jumped into it. Passed through the same despair and red and black and despair. This time I didn't pause on the other side. I hurried along the path.

And stopped at a fork.

I didn't remember that.

Left, right ... I felt paralyzed with the idea that this wasn't fair. Then I got a grip on myself. The solution to this dilemma was simple: pick one at random, keep track of where it took me, backtrack if it didn't pan out. There was nothing on my heels; I would settle down and watch what I was doing.

I chose the right. Before long, with relief, I saw the waiting interior of an open elevator.

When I stepped out, I found myself, this time, not in the middle of the projection room, but behind the curtain at the foot of the couch. The curtain had been open when I left. I pushed through into the room. The curtain next to mine was closed, too. There had been three Lab Coats here before. Now there was one, and she sat at the console with her back to me. I said, "What — everybody go to lunch or something?"

Still with her back to me she said, "Yes, sir."

"A little early for lunch, isn't it?" I didn't think I'd been Elsewhere that long.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not your boss. You don't have to call me sir."

"Yes, sir."

There was no sarcasm in her voice, which meant to me a kind of servitude I'd always found cloying. I wondered if she was the same Lab Coat that Langley had given a hard time about smoking. I said, "Got a cigarette? I left mine in my room." I walked over, leaned against the edge of the console.

And saw her face.

She didn't really have one.

It was all blank, sickly-pale skin except for a round aperture centered in the lower half that looked more like a sphincter than a mouth. The sphincter dilated.

"Yes, sir."

Chills brushed one side of my face. I backed away. Realized I was still backing away when I bumped into a curtain. I looked over my shoulder: it was the closed curtain beside the one I had come out of. I turned so that my back was neither to the Lab Coat nor the curtain. And pulled it open.

Lying on the couch there, curled up on its side in a fetal position, back toward me, was something vaguely human-shaped and more than human-sized. It was naked. Its skin was reddish and rubbery looking.

Slowly, carefully I pulled the curtain closed.

The Lab Coat was at console, seem-

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ingly paying no attention to me. I looked around. I had no idea whether I was in any danger here, but decided to get the hell out, regardless.

If I could.

I opened the projection-room door and looked out into the hallway. It wasn't the hallway. Greenish-yellow things crawled with sucking noises over fleshy looking cave walls. I slammed the door shut.

I thought to look behind the curtain I'd come through. The elevator was there, door open. I didn't waste much time getting into it. Pressed the DOWN button. It let me off in the anatomical junkyard. I was happy to see it again. I retraced my path, found the fork, took the other branch. Saw a waiting, open elevator. It took me back to the place I knew.

I had a shower and some lunch, feeling the while that I had been experiencing too much to absorb. I did my best to shake the feeling; there were things to be done: talk with Jeff over supper, my appointment with Langley after that, and, right now, some research.

I had *everybody's* file sent up to my room. I wanted to see if I could find anything that would point out a connection of some kind. Anything. I got several hundred pages of material. Fortunately, it was easy to weed through: there was a great deal of uselessness like height, weight and medical histories. The first thing I checked for was anyone with past ties to Kraus, through school or profession. I didn't think I would get anything from it, but it would give me a place to start and a pattern for my first run-through of the material. I was right. I didn't get anything. I did, however, discover that I liked doing this — working with small, dry, simple, dependable things that behaved as one expected. Those file folders and sheets of paper felt very reassuring in my hands.

And I knew this feeling wouldn't last.

That was a depressing thought. As I tried to go on reading in Langley's file about his employment history at Cybertech Research (a wholly owned subsidiary of Webber Communications), I was distracted by a powerful wish that I was somewhere sitting in an armchair beside a fire, snifter in hand, surrounded by the sound of Bach's *Fifth Suite for Unaccompanied Cello*.

The hands of my Travalarm moved, squeezing the afternoon smaller.

"Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... Mark."

And I was in the elevator. Kraus's landscape waited outside the door. I had an idea, something I wanted to check out. It seemed like a long shot, but all I had to do was press that button and go see if it would pay off.

I pressed it.

Conversation with Jeff over supper, last evening.

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"What about the anatomical junkyard, then?" I had asked him. "What is it?" (And as I remembered this, I stepped over an arm, hand palm-down, curved fingers looking as if they'd been frozen as they clawed the ground.)

"You want me to describe to you something you've seen for yourself?"

"Come on. You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," he said. "And I answered your question. You've seen it for yourself. Look, suppose I ask you, say, what is a tree?"

(I walked past a lopped head that sat, silently and impassively staring into the eyes of another head across the path.)

"Okay," he went on, "you could tell me about colloids and chlorophyll. Or you could tell me about its niche in the eco-system. Or you could tell me it's what junk mail is made out of. But the point is, the tree *is*. You wouldn't have been telling me what the tree *is*; you'd have been fitting the tree into the context of knowledge I already have. You see, I did answer your question. If I were to give you the answer you wanted, though, I'd be turning what I was telling you about into something that junk mail is made out of."

(I noticed a foot, in the middle of the path, just before the wall, as if it had fallen off as someone jumped through, and they had left it behind.)

"You still don't get it, do you? Look, after a few visits, you begin to see Elsewhere and here as two equally valid existences. The fact that when I'm Elsewhere I've left a body behind that could starve to death and end me, Elsewhere, everything, doesn't mean that my experience Elsewhere is invalid; it means the states have become *interdependent*. It means I'm a person who has been and is a lot of things. Means I'm somebody who brushes his teeth twice a day, who was once bitten by an organ grinder's monkey, who likes loud conversations over pitchers of beer. And somebody who walks Elsewhere — who, when he comes back, will lunch on a tuna salad sandwich and a cube of lime Jello with grated carrot in it, then go throw away his junk mail."

And I came out of the wall. I had passed through that terrible despair, and as I now walked through the second stretch of the anatomical junkyard, I saw all the parts and pieces as the detritus of that despair.

Behind me something crumbled away and toppled. I turned and looked: the debris had fallen into an almost-word.

I took the escalator down to the whispering, hissing, roaring, frustratingly unintelligible white water. (Remembering: Langley had leaned over his desk, and like the first time, his badge had flashed at me.)

The water roared and reached for me, and I withstood its attraction and almost, *almost* understood what it was saying. (When I'd finished telling him

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about Kraus, Langley'd said, "I'm going to tell you just one thing....")

The river rushed violently underground. I came to the vantage point before the cliff, saw the illegible word splashed there in primary colors. ("...You are trespassing outside of your place, mister," Langley had said. And while I was in his office, I hadn't thought to mention my run-in with Anderson to him.)

I stomped on the ground.

Colors flashed about the plain. On the cliff, the colors trembled, shook out of their almost-pattern. And fell into place.

You are trespassing outside of your place, Mister.

I had seen what I came for and wasn't happy. Kraus probably hadn't been happy to hear it. I turned to go.

Langley had been standing behind me. A pace behind him and to his right stood Anderson.

'Oh, God," said Langley, looking up at the cliff. "I knew it. I just knew it." He looked down at me. "You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you. You had to bring me to this." He waved Anderson forward. "He gets the same treatment as Kraus. I think that would look most plausible."

"Listen, pal," I said. "I'm not making you do anything. You're choosing it."

Anderson started toward me, going around Langley's right. I bolted in the other direction, toward the river.

It took them a fraction of a second to react. I ran like I had JATOs strapped to my back. I was sure I was widening the lead.

That bastard Anderson tackled me.

It is very difficult, even for two people, to hold onto somebody who's struggling as hard as he can. It's even more difficult to hold onto him and drag him somewhere.

It's easier if you don't mind beating up on him.

They dragged me to the edge of the river.

The water was lapping and splashing and frothing, reaching out its gray-green hands. It roared and hissed and whispered. I struggled. All other sounds were absorbed by the water — scufflings against the ground, rustle of clothing, slap of skin against skin, grunts of effort and pain. Seemingly emerging from the roar came glimpses of Anderson's face, and Langley's, flushed red and bearing grotesque expressions. I struggled.

And one of my feet came free. I kicked out, connected with something. My other foot came free. Then, in an instantaneous flash, came a clearer picture of my situation: Langley was clutching his shin; Anderson was on his hands and knees, astraddle my face, and under his hands was one of my forearms, under his knees, my other. He was shouting for Langley's help. I curled up at the waist, carefully and precisely kicked Anderson on the ear.

Then I was free, scrambling to my

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feet, running like hell along the river toward the escalator. I figured my only chance was to get to the elevator, then into the projection room and the company of witnesses.

I heard their footsteps behind me, but didn't slow myself down by looking back. Heard the roared, hissed, whispered and still unintelligible voice of the river.

Then I was on the escalator, pounding up the steps, and knew one of them, probably Anderson, was closing.

I got to the top, running, getting winded, and knew I'd never make it to the elevator.

I cut to the side, off the path, between two big piles of discarded anatomy, scrambled over a smaller pile, doubling back, then crouched in a good spot, just off the path, out of sight from it. I knew what I was going to do. As I tried — quietly — to catch my breath, I looked around me, selected a good piece. It was part of a hand: big enough to have a nice heft, but not unwieldy. All the fingers were broken off fairly short. There were a lot of jagged edges.

It would have to be in the face, I decided. Facial wounds bleed like crazy.

I heard cautious footsteps, got myself in position.

The footsteps came closer.

I heard rustling sounds from several places around me.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I checked myself over frantically, probing and looking at my fingertips, and finally saw the front of my shirt.

It was red.

I had a god-damned bloody nose.

There was a small avalanche of body parts from the pile next to me, and a long, gray, wrinkled tube poked out.

I jumped up, out onto the path. And found myself staring right into Anderson's startled face. I smashed it with the stone hand.

And ran.

After a moment risked a look back. Langley was skirting the fallen Anderson, running toward me. I hardly noticed him. I was looking at an enactment of the scene Jeff had described. Saw Anderson open his mouth to scream....

I ran again.

Langley was right behind me. I made it to the wall, still ahead of him, jumped in...

... came out of the despair and the colors of despair, and without hesitation picked up where I'd left off in my running. And Langley was *still* behind me. He must have been as desperate as I was. I thought, then, about stopping to fight him. But I'm *not* good in a fight. And the elevator was close.

I came to a place where the path curved right. With Langley as close behind me as an ice cube down the back of my shirt, I didn't take time to deliberate on the fact that there had once

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been a fork here, with a path curving left, too. I kept running.

So did Langley.

The elevator was just ahead of me, open and waiting. I ran into it, stopped myself with flat palms against the back.

Then, suddenly, a tableau: I stood just inside the elevator, my thumb on the UP button; Langley stood just outside, an incredulous expression on his face.

Just as the door started to close, his shoulders slumped, and he stepped inside. "So," he said. "This is it. It's all over."

I concentrated on breathing. Didn't answer him. Didn't mention we were in the wrong elevator.

The door opened. I saw that closed curtain and had an idea. "That's right, Langley, this is it." I took him by the arm, hustled him through the curtain and let it fall closed, hiding the elevator. The Lab Coat was sitting at her console, back toward us. I said to her, "You have a code you can enter into that thing to send for security, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then send for them."

"Yes, sir."

I was bull-shitting, hoping Langley was bureaucrat enough not to know the workings too well.

He said, shaking his head, "Over." We stood there, awkward. I watched him. For a few moments he avoided looking at me, then met my gaze and said, "What was I supposed to do?" There was a suggestion of pleading in his voice.

"Don't ask for anything from me." I walked to the door and leaned against it, both to keep him from trying to go through and to get him facing away from the Lab Coat.

"Listen to me. When I was in the space program, I went up for *one flight*, do you realize that? One lousy flight in the space shuttle, and they closed the program.... Do you remember John Glenn? Are you old enough to remember about him? They treated that man like a god-damn king. Like the god-damn savior of the world. I work for twenty god-damn *years*, and they shut the program down." His words sounded almost rehearsed. Maybe he'd said them to himself before, late at night. He started to run his hand through his hair, then held it there on top of his head. "When that man from Webber came to my little office at Cybertech, I *listened* to him." As the hand came slowly down he said, "You know, he told me that funds previously allocated to NASA are now going to the project, here," and he spread both hands between us. "I'm *entitled* to something." When I said nothing, he let the hands drop, turned toward the Lab Coat.

"Not to kill," I said quickly.

He turned back to me. "I didn't."

I didn't say anything.

"Listen to me. Anderson told me about Kraus. And because Kraus didn't

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come to me, he had to have known it *was* me. I just couldn't lose everything. Not again. That's understandable, isn't it?"

I still didn't say anything.

"Shit." He put his face in his hands. I heard him say, muffled, "I was just doing what I could with what was presented to me ... just—" Then, "Shit." And before I could stop him, he went over to the Lab Coat and put his hand on her shoulder, saying, "Get those security people in here for God's sake. I want to get this over with."

His hand on her shoulder caused her chair to swivel around until she faced him.

"Yes, sir."

He stared for a long time, maybe two seconds. Then he jerked his hand from her shoulder. Jerked himself stiffly upright. Turned — jerkily — to me. "*What* the hell...?"

The jig was up.

"*You*...." He pressed his lips together, looked around the room. I guess he thought he'd been set up, was looking for hidden witnesses before he started taking me apart. He stalked past me to the door, opened it and immediately slammed it shut. Stalked over to the curtains, pulled open the one next to the one we'd come through.

The naked rubbery thing on the couch rolled over and sat up. It looked right at Langley.

Its head was twice as big as it should have been with tiny lidless eyes, like a fish's, all but buried in folds of rubbery flesh. It had two nostril slits where a nose might have been, and its mouth was wide, like a toad's. It stood up. It must have been over eight feet tall. It was hermaphroditic. Then it opened its mouth. I saw what seemed like hundreds of tiny pointed teeth, curved inward so that something could have been pushed in past them but not pulled out — anything half-swallowed and struggling would only work its way farther in. It was the mouth of something that swallowed big things, whole. And the sound....

The roar of white water, the seductive sound of the river's rapids, came out of that creature's open mouth. Mixed in with the sound was the roared, hissed, whispered word which *now* I understood:

Langley.

He tried to get away.

The creature's hands were huge and powerful.

Jeff lit up another of my cigarettes.

I was saying, "...My best guess about Anderson is that he was just being loyal to the program. I think Langley had convinced him that first Kraus and then I were threats to the program. Which, I suppose, could have been interpreted as true."

I poured myself a little more brandy. "It doesn't look now as if we'll ever know for sure. Some loose ends never get tied up."

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"What about Webber Communications; what did they want with our data?"

"Are you kidding? Think what they could do once enough elements in the landscape Elsewhere had been codified to the point where someone could actually *program* an experience. You've already been doing this to a certain extent with the elevators during the opening and closing transitions. Think what kind of an entertainment medium it would make with the combination of programmed landscape and volitional specator."

He shook his head. "Think of the advertisements."

I preferred not to.

"So you did your job," Jeff said. "You found Kraus. Dumped in the river. Well, we know what to avoid now if we don't want to be dissolved throughout the landscape. I don't think it'll do the project much good, though. Too bad you couldn't have brought him back. Brought them all back."

I nodded.

"Listen, you've got this talent for finding things. Maybe you can find me another job."

I returned his sad smile.

He asked me what I was going to do now.

I told him about an appointment I had with an armchair and a fireplace and a record.

And on my way to that appointment, I thought a lot about some things. About how I had done my job to the letter of the agreement, and everybody, including myself, seemed to have lost something. About the people who would be cleaning up the mess I'd left behind — the orderlies and nurses who would be taking care of Kraus and Langley, the people in shirtsleeves who would be microfilming and shredding the papers and inventorying the equipment, the man in the dark suit who would be calling on Langley's wife to make explanations, the ones who would be burying Anderson. Thought about Jeff.... Maybe the project wouldn't fold after all, and he could stay.... Or maybe Webber would keep their own project going and he could get hired on with them.... Or maybe he would become a person who had, at one time, walked Elsewhere.... Maybe — the hell with maybes.... Let it go.

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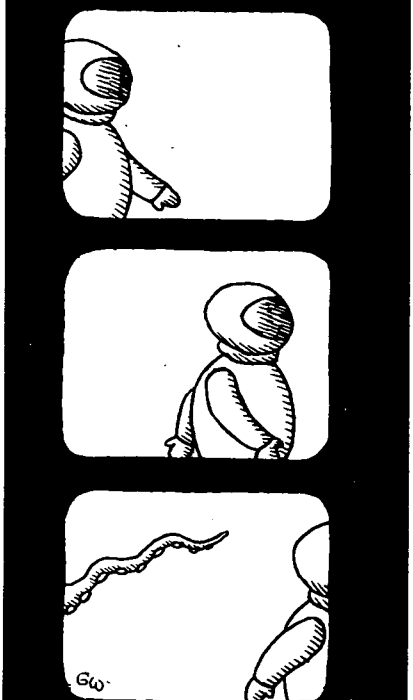
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

COMEXCALIBUR

Only a generation or so ago, if you were seeking fantasy — pure fantasy, as it were, not s/f or ghost stories or whimsy — it was a precious small field. There were classics such as Dunsany and Morris, prodigies from that unlikeliest of pulp magazines, *Unknown*, such as Leiber's Gray Mouser stories, and odd juveniles, *The Hobbit*, for one. And there were the comics.

Nowadays fantasy — pure fantasy, heroic fantasy — is BIG. Credit for this can be laid to the Great Kindler, Tolkien; but the promulgation thereof, despite the best efforts of the written word (those best efforts ranging from dear old "Two Gun" Bob Howard to the enchanting Patricia McKillip) should be credited to the comics.

Now, a whole generation, some of which cannot or will not read, is geared to the idea of created kingdoms and worlds, magically endowed heroes and heroines, and inhuman characters from the endearing to the unspeakable.

This month I am given two mass-media productions that are true fantasy. I first thought to do them in one column, but they both engender so many calories for thought that I will risk being even more after-the-fact than usual and devote a piece to each, unless some more vital subject comes along (a musical of Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horrors," for instance). First, *Excalibur*, next, *Fugitive From the Empire*.

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The Arthurian saga, despite its literary manifestations, is in essence folklore and acceptable fantasy even when fantasy was at its lowest ebb. Therefore we have a surprising number of Arthur films from the past: MGM's almost completely *un*fantastic *Knights of the Round Table,* lushly produced, with an equally lush Ava Gardner as Guinevere and the bland Lancelot of Robert Taylor; the grim French *Lancelot of the Lake* with no fantastic elements at all; Disney's *The Sword in the Stone,* which almost achieved the charm of the T.H. White novel; the sickeningly 1940s Arthurian court of *A Connecticut Yankee* etc., complete with Bing Crosby; *Camelot,* arguably good, but with a production of ravishingly fairy-tale quality and the noblest Gwen of them all, Vanessa Redgrave.

But nobody has given us as much Arthur as John Boorman in *Excalibur* — soup to nuts, Uther to Avalon, we get every major aspect of the tale, two-and-a-half hours worth. And it's as much a failure as his *Zardoz* was a triumph; Boorman, who showed a superabundance of intelligence in the earlier s/f film, seems perversely and deliberately to have used none of it on the fantasy. He has given us a two-and-a-half hour comic strip (*not* animated film; *comic strip).*

Now I have nothing against comics. I lived on them as a child (one of the few ways — see above — to get my fantasy fix), and as a nominal adult, concede that they have an esthetic and, at their best, can be supremely artistic and/or intelligent. I, like so many science fiction readers, do tend to resent their confusion with s/f in the public mind (the French tend to think of them as one and the same thing entirely).

And at their worst (and the percentage of euphemism is even higher than Sturgeon's law allows), comics are revolting. (What *isn't,* of course, but this is the topic of the month.) Even if the art is superb, and often these days it is, there is a necessary simplification of content, sometimes to the point of simple-mindedness, because of what can be communicated in drawing and minimal wordage; complicated concepts just don't work. This is, interestingly enough, a problem shared by film, but film simply has more *room* for information. If the material is original, it can be tailored to this problem; comic adaptations of material from other media can, and usually do, send anyone that cares about that material up the wall.

In *Excalibur,* Boorman has adopted, presumably deliberately, this kind of approach; the enormous amount of material is done with a speed and flatness of content, dialogue and characterization that can only be compared to the comics; the people in the MGM version seem like characters from Proust in comparison. And when one is aware of the myriad literary variations woven on these great themes, the film becomes downright offensive. (And I don't mean that in terms of Great Liter-

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ature; Rosemary Sutcliff's ruthlessly realistic *Sword At Sunset* is as fine in its way as Naomi Mitchison's viciously funny *To the Chapel Perilous.)*

Visually also, Boorman goes for the splediferously obvious: the settings of huge, bloody suns, lots and lots of fog, an enchanted cavern of monumental, Disney-worldly vulgarity, and silver-chrome-armoured knights that look just off the Detroit assembly line. Even the nature shots, of that unearthly greenery that only appears in the British isles, seem forced and arty.

I have a particular and personal disgust at the music, quotes from *Carmina Burana, Tristan,* and (I think) *Siegfried,* used over and over and trimmed to fit whatever scene they accompanied. Classical music has been used well in cinema, but this is pure low-budget, porn film technique.

The actors did as well as they could in two dimensions in every direction. I thought Cherie Lunghi's frowzy, rock-singer look way off for Guinevere, and the performance of the eminent Nicol Williamson as Merlin was watered-down, Guinness thin.

This *Excalibur* wasn't found in a rock; it was found under it.

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In which two affectionals meet for a drink in a cafe and discuss flowers and slaughter....

There the Lovelies Bleeding

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

"We *can* change," Helga says. Her pained eyes open to depths of luminescence. "We backslide, governments fail us, our leaders betray us, but in infinitesimal ways the human soul, the human heart can be taught to apprehend; it is different now than it was in the sixties. People are kinder, warmer, more open, more vulnerable."

Helga sips from her glass of bitters, a faint tremor in her delicate hand. Her expressiveness is to me the most adored part of her, even though from the wastes of my own dread I fear that her optimism comes from naivete. Robomechanisms drift by us on skates; the thin hum of the conditioners fills the cafe. An old man in the corner goes spontaneously insane and is trapdoored; the odors of his falling persist with those of spinach greens. Our robowaiter appears at my elbow. "Will there be any more?" he says.

"I would like some coffee," Helga says. "I would like some tea," I say. I have given up palliatives as a gesture of good will and out of my conviction that I dare not mask my feelings for Helga with anodynes of any sort. We have known each other only a fortnight — counting a day on either end more or less; it is hard to keep track of time as the millennium itself is felt to be unwinding — but it is certainly the most profound relationship of my life. I have had sixteen affectional relationships and thirty-seven cooperatives altogether, but none have ever hit me as has Helga. She says that she feels the same. Everything that I say to her she says back to me with greater force, which is one of the reasons that I find her lovable; I am possessed of my own convictions. Some of them. Some of the time. "See, the lovelies bleeding,"

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Helga says as the waiter skates over with our coffee and tea, "see the century dreaming, see the hearts unknown." She hums a wisp of melody under her breath, a Dovvorini concerto, although I am not sure of this. This is also one of her lovable traits, her disposition to hum at strange times and in gentle keys. "You're not saying much," she says. "Are you all right?"

"I'm listening to you."

"Do you know what lovelies bleeding are?" Helga says. "They are a flower, a kind of flower. I looked that up in an old glossary: isn't that interesting?"

"Surely," I say, "it is all very interesting. Evocative." Screams from the corridors waft into us; clearly it is the sound of the slaughterhouse detail herding the recalcitrants toward their four o'clock re-education, and I wince with the pain. "A kind of flower," I say. "Life is a kind of flower, its blooms dying but exquisite."

"You're too pessimistic. I told you that. Things can get better. It's not the way it used to be. Back in the early nineties people took the slaughterhouse details for granted, never talked about them. Now there are real movements against the situation; these things are being discussed."

"Surely," I say. I sip my tea. "Nonetheless the slaughters go on."

"But less so and not without protest."

"Perhaps," I say. I give a silent gesture. Despite the reforms, it is still perhaps unwise to discuss the slaughtering details in the cafes. Helga's mouth forms to an *o* of understanding. "Perhaps we should leave," she says. "We could make love; we have the last twenty minutes of the shift left." It is her disarming directness, her fragility, her astonishment at her own bluntness which makes her so lovable to me, the most profound of my sixteen affectionals. I feel profoundly stirred.

"Why not?" I say. I reach over and touch her hand. She caresses back. In the fluorescence her hair is first brown, then red, shading toward fire, a little corona coming from her aspect, although this may be only created by desire. "Why not?" One of the servowaiters ruptures suddenly with a hollow sound; the explosion shakes the cafe. Plastics are thrown over him; he is drenched with water and quickly rolled away. "The sooner the better," I say.

I signal to our waiter. Shaken by the damage incurred by his fellow machine, he comes over cautiously. I hand him my credito; he takes the imprint. "And a good day, sir," he says. His metallic eyes glint compassion. "And thank you for your courtesies."

"You see," Helga whispers, "they're *much* better than the old ones. They have kindness circuits built in."

We stand together; our bodies collide. The touch, the slight incision we make against one another is stunning; I feel desire supersede dread within me.

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Helga takes my arm. "It wouldn't have been this way even a few years ago," she says. "We couldn't have had a public affectional; we couldn't have had the courage to love one another."

"Perhaps," I say. "Perhaps." I am diffident. It is easier not to take a position in disagreement: besides, Helga may well be right. I have been seeing many things differently since our circumstance began. Hand in hand we walk through the cafe, barely seeing the sprawled bodies of the over-anodyned, the affectionals clutching, the cooperatives staring past one another at walls the color of plasma. The servos part for us as we approach them; beam for identity and the absence of detonative devices, open the walls and let us through. In the corridor brisk winds assail us coated with the smell of blood. The sounds of the slaughterhouse grind through the eaves of the undersystem.

"Quickly," Helga says, taking my elbow, "quickly." She propels me through the hall, beginning to hum Dovvorini. Enthralled by her, by love, by possibility, I follow.

"It will get better yet," Helga says as we approach the hydraulics which will take us to our cubicle. "It will get better and better yet. Two decades ago who would have dreamed we would have this much?"

She is right. In 2978 who would have dreamed we would have this much? How would I have known myself someday worthy of even this?

Clutched by love, I wait for lovelies bleeding. The odors of slaughter are now flowers reaching, bleeding in the night.

Coming Next Month

32nd ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

John Brunner
Avram Davidson
John Varley
Philip K. Dick
Richard Cowper
George R. R. Martin
Thomas M. Disch
R. Bretnor
and others

Watch for the October issue, on sale September 3.

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Thomas Wylde ("The Incredibly Thick World," March 1979) offers a fast and furious and not entirely serious story about a washroom attendant on a space liner. And you thought the action was on the bridge.

Indigestion

BY

THOMAS WYLDE

The *Gryen* businessman squeezed my neck between two of his coarse grit fingers. "Can you deliver, Bobby?" he asked for probably the fifth time since the cruise began — and we were still three wormholes and a ramjet session from Lesser Magellanic Base.

"Answer me!"

I tried hard to answer for several perplexing seconds before I noticed not only wasn't anything coming out, nothing had been going *in* for quite a while. My bugging eyes darted about.

Nobody in the First Class lounge seemed to be interested. Music rattled and thumped and plinked.

The *Gryen* gentleman tilted his head quizzically. "Can't you breathe?"

A rhetorical question, obviously.

The *Gryen* took a moment to scratch his bumpy face with an icepick fingertip. A pustule burst and half a dozen buzzing mites emerged. The *Gryen's* goons scrabbled for them, caught and ate them.

The *Gryen* brushed his men out of the way. "Bobby, Bobby, why won't you help me?"

"Nggnnn."

"I was told you were the one to consult. They told me you could supply my wants. They rather got my hopes up. Aren't you the least bit sympathetic?"

His two-fingered grip relaxed. Seven or eight molecules of air rushed in to fill up my lungs. Good luck, fellas....

The *Gryen* did his "smile" — and all three gaping nose holes widened, cilia rippling. "I'm a reasonable chap when you get to know me."

More good news....

I finally made it back to the can and requisitioned a faceful of cool water

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(charging it to the *Gryen's* account). I stared at my dripping face. "I hope you're happy."

They never told me washroom attendant was such a complicated career. Fine place for the only "real" man on this extragalactic traveling freak show.

I grinned. Nothing like a little human chauvinism to perk a guy up. Besides, I'd volunteered — make that *begged* — for a chance to hit the spaceways.

Two *Queels* pitter-patted into the washroom. I put 'em in stalls nine and ten, then programmed the pumps.

Don't get me wrong. I was ready to do menial work, ready even for the washroom. I'm not proud — especially after what happened back home.

Now I'm not complaining about the *baksheesh*. I can use the bucks.

And if these *weeners* want a bit of recreational druggy-time, well suffice it to say I've sucked up my share of black *wabba*-coffee. I'm no prude.

It's just that this job is so damned chaotic. They *all* want something different — and I'm a trained plastic surgeon, not a bloody chemist.

The *Queels* shuffled out, arguing in sibilants. Suddenly one of them reached down the throat of his buddy far enough to squeeze some internal organ or other. Immediately every hair on the both of them stood on end (about a meter) and the squeezed *Queel* ejected some purple slime. Out they went.

I reached for the electric mop like a good boy.

A good thing I had finished the SANITIZE cycle before my next pair of customers sluiced in — these *Beekies* stick to everything.

I tried to settle them into booths five and six, but they wanted to stay together. They whined and I apologized. I'd forgotten *Beekies* don't dare do it alone.

I cranked up the airlock vacuum probe and the automatic scrub brushes (medium hard bristles), then checked the collector for *Queel* artifacts. Pay dirt.

While I was packaging the stuff up, I thought about my problem with the *Gryen*.

I'd had several days to consult the washroom bible. The dope he wanted — insisted on — was so amazingly hard to come by I'd let the matter drift, hoping he'd forget. (Ha!)

The main problem was one of source. There was only one *sshmoona* on the ship, an elderly statesman on his way home to die. Gertrude told me she'd served him in the dining room. But I'd never had him in my washroom.

Just my luck he was corked up fine as you please. For all I knew it was against his religion.

I spotted the old geezer across the dining room by the emergency airlock. Gertrude was just setting a speedplate before him. I wondered what he was eating. (This is where the rural chemistry comes in.)

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I caught Gertrude's eye and winked. She frowned, as usual, and hotfooted it for the service chute.

A job-nervous spinster in sensible shoes. Her rump was too big. And she wore virgin wool socks in bed. On her hands.

But she was all I had.

I am hopelessly hooked on my own species.

And Gertrude was it this go-round.

I started out along the perimeter of the dining room, trying for a closer look at the *sshmoona's* plate.

"Glagga ned!" said a low voice.

I didn't want to turn. "Beg pardon?"

They hustled me into the service alcove — the *Gryen's* goons, all fists and teeth and hairy pustules.

One of them put his mouth in my face and said, *"Fffikwha!"*

His breath made my mouth water.

He held me while his partner planted a bomb in my ear.

"Hello, Bobby," said the bomb. "I just wanted to take this opportunity to remind you of your obligations. Please understand I am a patient man. But realize, too, Bobby, that patience is a relative thing, coerced by natural values, defined by culture, and subject to the tyranny of genetic material. In short, while your own perfectly proper rhythms might suggest this matter can safely languish for an hour or so, I'm afraid the length of my patience — vast as it seems to me — measures out your grace period in pico-seconds. So, with that in mind — *bon voyage!*"

Then one of the goons made a gesture with one finger.

When I could see again, I found Gertrude leaning over me.

"Are you drunk?" she asked, merciful creature.

"Wha?" I said. "Hmmm?" I said. "Gnnnn," I said.

She frowned. "And keep your hoodlum friends out of the First Class dining room."

"Giggie," I said.

"Really," she said. "Sometimes I wonder about my taste in men."

She left in a haze of wonderment.

It didn't matter. I felt perfectly comfortable on the floor wedged up under the serving chute. There were a lot of things on my mind just then. I just couldn't think of any *one* of them....

"Meab," said the secret recipe book. I squinted at the handwritten squiggle. "Meab?" So faded — thirty years old at least — probably jotted down when the first humans shipped out as servants on the alien starcruisers, right after the war. "Meab.... Ah, *meat!*"

But what kind of meat?

There was a chance it didn't make any difference. Some digestive systems are like that, stomachs swathed in generalities.

Now the *sshmoona*....

I slammed the little book on the scrub counter. Time was running —

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make that *had run* — out.

Dinner was over, but maybe there was some sort of snack on the schedule.

I put the washroom on automatic and went looking for Gertrude.

"Meat?"

"Any kind of meat," I said. "You could maybe cruise by his cabin and slip him some meatballs."

Gertrude glared at me. "Mister, your garden's gone to seed."

I pleaded with her (which is common enough in our relationship). "They're going to *kill* me!"

"Ridiculous!" Then she pointed a finger at me. "But if you *were* to find yourself in trouble, it only goes to prove what I've been saying. And you say you were a doctor!"

She went on and on. I tuned her out for a while. There had to be ways to get meat into the *sshmoona*, even if I had to make an up-front deal, sort of lay my cards (or a careful selection thereof) on the table.

Then something Gertrude was saying caught my attention.

"Wait a second," I said. "What do you mean, *no meat*?"

"No *real* meat." She looked at me in surprise. "Didn't you at least *read* the brochure on this cruise?"

"Lady, I had to go so bad I'd've signed up as *fuel*. I didn't read nothing."

She got that superior look that seemed so at home on her face. "And now look at you."

I got an emergency call and trotted back to the can.

Three anxious *Moggs* were lined up, each holding a different part of his body. Another circus of cooperation.

Their looks of desperation sold me. I opened the Express Lane. "Enjoy!"

I was at the console fumbling through a tricky analysis when the *Beekie* crept up behind me. (Those wet monopods always get the drop on you.)

He held up a pocket tranny mirror. I looked in at myself.

"Greetings, menial," my image said to me. "Understand your dilemma, *vis-a-vis Gryen* import-export maggot. Beg to supply you with sublime information. *Sshmoona*-man my buddy-buddy, he sends still further greetings. Wishes to assist, providing he gets flesh of high quality and most excellent toothsomeness."

"What else does the gentleman want besides meat?"

"Meat, alone, sufficiency. *Sshmoona*-man fails to read brochure, finds himself on hellhole of spaceship without meat. Cravings abominate."

"Tell him *okay*."

"You come now. Bring your meat. Cookingness not require."

The *Beekie* snatched the mirror from my face and slid-rolled to the door. He looked back at me (I think) and waited.

"Uh, now?"

The *Beekie* waited, his undercarriage quivering.

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I needed time to think.

All right, so the *sshmoona* was ripe to cooperate in the saving of my unworthy hide. Great news, greatly welcomed.

But right at the moment I was having trouble laying my hands on meat. Even meat of most shoddy toothsomeness.

The *Beekie* gave me the hurry-up sign.

"Uh, look," I said. "I'll go with you and *talk* with the *sshmoona* gentleman. But only talk, because to tell you the truth I don't exactly have any meat *on* me."

The *Beekie* whined. He flashed the mirror at me.

"We go *now*!"

I didn't like the look in my eyes.

As I followed in the antiseptic path of the *Beekie*, I wondered why the *sshmoona* had not come to me himself. It might have had to do with his age or his status, both of which were sufficiently advanced to command some perks.

But what if it was something else?

And what was gonna happen when I showed up meatless?

I was doing a good job of spooking myself out when I noticed we were passing the kitchen.

"Hold it!" I yelled after the *Beekie*.

He turned and raised his tranny mirror.

"I'll just be a second, really," I said, pushing open the kitchen service door. I flashed half a dozen quick smiles. "Just pop in here for an extremely short second."

The mirror's image caught me between the eyes.

"We go *now*! No damning fiddle-faddle!"

I'd never seen myself look so fierce. I suddenly realized why those outraged patients had let me walk out of that hospital alley on the night of my escape ... I mean, retirement.

"*Go now!*" the mirror growled.

"Rightaway," I said, ducking fast into the kitchen.

I nearly trampled Gertrude on her way out.

"This kitchen is off-limits!" she said.

I pointed at the glass of milk in her hand but didn't have time to call her on it. "There must be meat in here some place!"

"I told you!"

But I was already striding for the food lockers.

"Get out of my kitchen!"

"I need meat and I need it *now*."

"I told you—"

"Don't *tell* me. Find me some meat. Okay, so it's a meatless cruise. What a cute gimmick — for the paying customers. But surely there's a speck of meat lying about — for the crew, maybe?"

She shook her head, then sipped her milk.

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I pawed through some racks of frozen grub. I heard the kitchen door opening behind me.

I turned and glared at Gertrude. The *Beekie* was sliding in behind her. "For emergencies, then!"

"Emergency meat." Gertrude sniffed. "I think not."

The tranny mirror behind her said in my voice, "We go now plenty." Then to Gertrude, in her face and voice: "Excuse, please. I need this man to go with me."

"And welcome to him," she said. She turned to me. "Bobby, will I, uh, will I see you tonight?"

"That depends."

More unpleasantness, either way.

The *Beekie* herded me into the *sshmoona's* cabin and left us alone. The *sshmoona* was curled up on a special couch, his two dozen or so feet carefully arranged.

I'd say he didn't look happy, but that's only an opinion based on fear.

He clitter-clacked, and a viewscreen lit up behind him. It showed a grotesquely humanized version of the *sshmoona* — like a centipede with hollywood teeth and a toupee.

"Happy you could join us," said the image. The rattling continued, and the viewscreen gave simultaneous translation.

"I'd have rolled out to greet you," he said, "but my grievous affliction ... forbids it. The gout, you would call it."

I nodded. The old bug must have a history of meat eating. It wasn't good for him, but he wanted more. Human nature.

He went on: "My moist friend has told you of my interest. What news have you?"

"Not good, sir."

The viewscreen clattered softly, translating my words. Several of the *sshmoona's* feet trembled in response.

I nervously explained the situation in the kitchen, stressing my close contacts on the staff. I suggested that a more thorough search of the emergency freezers might just....

Several more feet waved; impatiently, I thought.

"Surely *you* can do something for me," the *sshmoona* said.

My damned reputation again. Where the hell do they get these ideas? I mean, sure, I'm *good* ... but, geez....

"You," the *sshmoona* said. "After all, you are a *human being*."

"Hey," I said, as humbly as possible. "I give it my best shot."

Frankly I was surprised at human boosterism coming from this giant bug. I mean, we lost the war and everything, right? Score one to the ultimate diplomat.

I went on: "Look, sir, I know we humans have sort of slipped off the ladder to the top of the old galactic heap, but we do have our good points. I appreciate your support. And I want to tell you I'll do my damnedest to get you some meat."

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I winked. "Even if I have to do a little rough surgery down in Third Class, if you catch the way I'm drifting. What sort of meat do you think will do the trick?"

"Meat?" he asked. "I don't just want *meat*."

"No?" There seemed to be a hot, dry wind blowing up my shirt. "What, uh, what do you want?"

The *sshmoona* half rose from the couch. I stepped back, bounced off the bulkhead.

It was time to leave. I just knew it.

"I'll tell you what I want," he said. The soft rattle of his voice had become a loud crackling. "*Meab* is what I crave — and it's the *only* food that will satisfy your ... scatological requirements."

"*Meab*," I whispered. So the old recipe book was penned more accurately than I'd thought. Not that it mattered. "I don't think I have any, uh...."

The alien's laugh was unmistakable — *gak gak gak gak*....

"*You* don't have it?" he roared. "You have nothing *but*!"

"I don't, uh...."

"*Meab* is flesh — *your* flesh."

One funny thing about this: as bad as I felt at that moment — I'd feel a hell of a lot worse in five minutes.

I had no sooner staggered out of the *sshmoona's* cabin than I was set upon by the *Gryen's* goons. They wrenched me out of my funk and into the stinking presence of their boss.

The *Gryen's* voice seemed to possess a timbre of almost hysterical giddiness. "So, my good friend, I see you are making excellent progress in our little quest."

"Not really," I mumbled.

"Ah, but you have located the vehicle of production."

"The *sshmoona*?"

"Exactly. And you have discovered the occult ingredient to my most eagerly awaited morsel."

"*Meab*."

"Precisely. This is really most excellent progress — though I'll admit it's taken you *eons* to assemble this modest package."

"It's hopeless."

"Not at all!" the *Gryen* roared. (Everybody was yelling at me today.) He pointed a lethal digit at me. "And it angers me to hear an attitude of defeatism voiced. It's true you humans have stumbled on the path to galactic competence, but that's no reason to give yourself over to these maladjusted mewlings. Buck up!"

This creep was making me mad (the *Gryen's* goons leaned forward eagerly), but I held myself back.

"Look, sir," I said. "Most of you aliens either don't know or don't *want* to know how I supply their peculiar needs. But it's obvious you know all about the *sshmoona* and what I'll have to do. So why do you need me? Why don't you just deal directly with the *sshmoona*?"

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"Let me try to explain," said the *Gryen*. "I deal with you because you are the traditional go-between in such matters. I see no reason why you should be cheated out of your pieces of eight. And I deal with *you* because while it amuses the *sshmoona* to deal with you, it would *not* interest him to deal with *me*. These matters are rather distasteful to *gentlemen*. Am I clear?"

"I guess...."

He placed an icepick fingernail between my eyes and whispered. "If you dare to discuss these ugly arrangements with me again, I will take your head between my fingers and pop your brains out through your eyeholes."

"Fair enough."

"Then we agree." He leaned back. "And now, just to solidify this meeting in your mind...."

He motioned to his henchmen. They scrambled over and crammed my head into a tight-fitting cap.

Before I could squawk, the "smiling" noses of the *Gryen* blurred and dissolved into a sheet of brilliant pain. I spent some time in a universe of agony — 6422 hours, 18 minutes, 38 seconds.

I counted.

It was all I had to do.

When it was over, the *Gryen* told me it'd all been nicely compacted into three and a half seconds. Just a sample.

"Now," he said. "Go to work."

Gertrude was already in bed, naked, wool socks on the nightstand — ready for action.

I dropped heavily onto the bed, upsetting the cracker-crumb palace she'd assembled on her stomach.

She squealed. "Careful!"

Very quietly I said, "Don't shout, Gertrude. I'm not in the mood for shouting."

She moved closer. "What *are* you in the mood for, stud?"

"Oh God, Gertrude, not now!"

"You beast!"

"Look, I'm in a real bind here, do you mind? I need a chunk of meat right about now. It's rather important. So I planned to do a little quiet thinking about it. All right?"

She looked away, sulking. After a while she said, "I thought we agreed not to bring our jobs to bed."

"I'm sorry."

"I mean, I don't go around telling you how many of those animals wanted seconds on *jilla*-cake tonight. Do I?"

"No."

"And I don't bend your ears off griping about how the flashcook console gives me a little shock every time I turn around. Do I?"

"Practically never."

"And I don't — What do you mean, *practically never*?"

"Oh God, Gertrude," I sobbed. "I need meat, and if I don't get some in about five minutes, I'm going to have to spend the next billion years in hell and still make it back in time for breakfast, after which there still won't be

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any meat and I'll have to spend another ten trillion years in hell and it'll *still* only be lunch time and there won't be any meat and it'll still be three wormholes and a month of ramming before we can get to any place where they *might* have meat and by that time I'll have spent a trillion billion jillion years in hell with a little wind-up clock ticking away and me counting every damned tick-tick-tick-tick—"

"Bobby!"

"I'm all right," I said. I took a deep breath. "I may just have to cut off an arm and cook it for an eight-foot centipede in a brown toupee. Routine stuff for us washroom menials."

She examined me critically. "Sometimes you worry me."

"Leave me alone, Gertrude."

But she wouldn't shut up after that. I stopped listening, but I couldn't stop looking at her.

You know, Gertrude isn't half bad looking. Butt's too big, of course, but she had nice legs. Nice calves ... shapely ... meaty....

I reached down and grabbed her leg. "C'mon, honey, get dressed. We got work to do."

The washroom was quiet during sleeptime. Gertrude sniffed at it. "This place is depressing."

"You ain't seen nothing yet."

The *Beekie* came in, half carrying the *sshmoona*.

"Thank you both for coming so quickly," I said.

I led everyone into the Maximum Security Stall and grabbed the gut accelerator off the wall. "Shall we begin?"

Gertrude screamed, and the hours were filled with hazard.

The *Gryen* crouched in his cabin, flanked by the usual goons. I approached with a small plastic container.

"Ah," growled the *Gryen*. "Most propitious timing. How are you this fine morning?"

"Fair."

"Sleep well?"

"Had to work."

"Pity. And how's your temporary mate?"

"I'm afraid she's in the hospital."

"Pity." The *Gryen* "smiled." "Still, sacrifices must be made." He gestured at the box. "I presume this is the substance contracted for?"

I nodded. "And it must be consumed immediately to get the proper effect."

"So I understand," he said, drooling a bit.

I brought the box to him and opened it. There was a sort of green fudge inside. He didn't move. "Not so fast, my friend."

I started to shake, as I knew I would when we got to this point. "What's wrong?"

"Just out of ... politeness, suppose we first offer some of this psychogenic confection to my loyal companions here." The goons leaned forward stupidly.

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I stammered, asking if there would be enough.

"We shall see."

The goons peeled off half of the stuff and shared it. In a few seconds they were laid back, "smiling," and growling euphoric reports to their boss. It was the Real Thing.

The *Gryen* yanked the box from my hands and gobbled the contents. "You may go!"

I sighed. "Gladly."

I left the three of them sprawled happily on the padded deck. Gertrude's sacrifice was well appreciated — maybe that would cheer her up. I doubted it.

I shut the cabin door, then quickly made it spacetight — just in case.

In fifteen seconds there came two muffled explosions, close together. I heard the *Gryen* roar in surprised hatred, then the third concussion — the big one — shook the bulkhead.

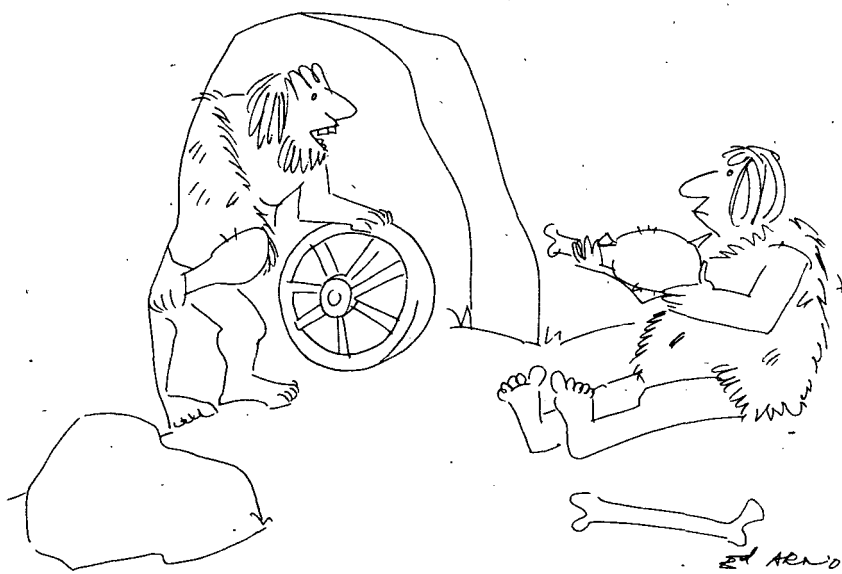
I checked the seals for leaks and breathed a sigh of relief.

Now I wanted to go see how Gertrude was getting on. I'd taken about a kilo and a half of subcutaneous fat off her rump — just enough for the *sshmoona* to produce a dopey coating for the *Beekie's* exploding crap.

I turned away from the cabin door and grinned.

One of the guests floated up to me and squeaked, "What was that explosion?"

I shrugged. "Indi ... gestion."'



"Get Detroit on the phone."

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The fine story below was winner of the 1980 Transatlantic Review award; this is its first publication. Its author writes that he is "twenty-nine, living in New York with my wife, Anne and our five-year-old daughter, Jenna. I'm a student in the Columbia University MFA writing program and have sold about a dozen stories to various publications, including New Dimensions, Galaxy *and* Isaac Asimov's."

Dinosaurs On Broadway

BY
TONY SAROWITZ

After a month in New York, it seemed to Sylvia that everything she did was part of a dream. She looked across the desk at the interviewer, a Mrs. Vedicchio, and stared at the beautiful white hair piled on her head like whipped cream. "New York isn't Oregon," Mrs. Vedicchio said, as if this was a point of subtle misunderstanding between them. Sylvia nodded. It was her third job interview of the day, and she was thinking about her own hair, which seemed limp and heavy to her, as if it were made of clay. In a certain sense, it was; Clay was her name. Her name was Sylvia Clay. "Perhaps if you had a master's," Mrs. Vedicchio went on, "or a few local references. Administrative positions in parenting and early childhood are so hard to find these days." Sylvia nodded again and smiled, picturing herself eating Mrs. Vedicchio's white hair with a spoon.

She thought about hair while she walked to the subway station at 116th, and she made a list in her mind of a few things, besides Oregon, that New York was not. It was not warm in January, which was this month. It was not a gentle fragrance carried on the wind. It was not the Triassic, Jurassic, or Cretaceous period of the Mesozoic era (this last item from a picture book about dinosaurs that she had bought for Madeline a week ago). She stood on the subway platform and looked at her wristwatch, thinking about how long she had before Maddy was due out of school. She thought about Maddy and looked at the yellow eyes of the approaching train and thought about the noise, which was like the howl of a beast. She imagined that it was a beast, an armored ankylosaur, its tough hide scraping along the tunnel wall as it charged down the track. She closed her

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eyes, and all her thoughts were pictures in her mind — subway trains, snowdrifts, white hair, dinosaurs, wildflowers. Then the platform tilted sixty degrees and she fell onto the tracks.

Mishaps seemed to be a way of life for Sylvia in New York. There had been runaway buses, stray bullets flying past her on the street. This, however, was her first time in an ambulance. The noise of the siren was horrible. She sat up and tried to explain that she was fine, nothing wrong aside from a few scrapes and bruises, but the attendant cooed at her, "No, no," and gently eased her down onto the stretcher. The ambulance wailed on. At the hospital, the admitting nurse insisted that she be examined, and although Sylvia could remember rolling safely off the tracks, she began to wonder if the train hadn't hit her after all instead of gliding by her like a screeching black cloud. She counted her fingers and toes in sudden panic. "I feel ridiculous," she told the doctor, wide-eyed. "Is this a symptom of something, shock, concussion, to feel so entirely absurd?"

She was sitting in a waiting area, sipping tea from a styrofoam cup when Richard arrived. He stood in front of her, hands on his hips, coat still buttoned, scarf immaculately tucked around his neck. "What's the bottom line, Syl?" he said.

She tried to make a joke of it. "I can't get a job without training. I was just trying to get on the right track." He stared at her. "I'm fine," she said. "It was nothing, really. In a minute I'm going to pick up Maddy. They shouldn't have even called you. But I'm glad you're here. If you're glad, that is. I hope you weren't in the middle of anything."

"As long as you're all right, healthwise," he said. "Maddy and I would have a hell of a time coping if anything happened to you. You are all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, Dick." She was accustomed by now to this new lingo of his, this bureaucratese. She told herself that it was a superficial manner of speach, nothing more, as if he'd adopted the accent and idiom of a foreign land. She stood and put on her coat. "Wife-wise, I'm fine."

"Well." He clapped his hands in a businesslike manner. "The office isn't expecting me back. We'll get Maddy, then eat out somewhere, give you an evening to recoup." He paused. "I mean, if it's all right with you. If I wouldn't be in the way."

"Of course not," she said, smiling. He nodded seriously and went to open the door.

Sylvia often felt small on the streets of New York. It had to do with the height of the buildings and the density of the crowds. She was a small woman to begin with, just two inches over five feet. In the midst of a crowd she felt lost.

She had fallen behind Dick on the

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sidewalk. His walk had changed since they'd moved, his strides had become short and brisk. Watching him from behind made her think of aftershave ads. She ran up to him and took his arm, and he turned to her, an utter stranger. She stepped back, confused, speechless. The man barely glanced at her before walking on, and for a moment, it seemed to her that any one of a dozen broad backs walking away from her on the street could be Dick's. Then she saw him. She took hold of his arm so tightly that he looked at her with surprise.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She shook her head. She was thinking nothing that she could put into words. As they walked down the street together, she pictured a brachiosaur submerged to its hips in the East River, neck outstretched, tenderly nipping at the greenery of a penthouse garden terrace.

Dick waited outside while Sylvia talked to Maddy's first-grade teacher. "I'm worried about Maddy," Sylvia said. "She's been so quiet the past month, since we moved."

Ms. Brown was an overweight black woman in her late fifties. She wore a cotton print dress — tiny yellow ducks on a field of green. "Never you mind, Miz Clay," she said with a wide grin. "Your little girl's just fine. Why, given the paradigms of normalcy accepted by modern pedagogic thought, she's moving right along toward optimal self-actualization. Next year we might think on the possibility of issuing a few proximity reinforcers during the morning module, but then she'll have a new facilitator. She won't be my dumpling any more."

This was something that Sylvia had thought a lot about, as much as she was able to think about anything, these days. "I just want to know if she's all right," she said. "I know something about children, what's healthy and what isn't. When we lived in Eugene, I organized parenting groups and child-care co-ops. I saw how Maddy acted with other kids. I know —"

"Oooeee," Ms. Brown exclaimed. "You sure were something, Miz Clay. You say this was Eugene?"

"Eugene, Oregon."

"Is that in the USA?" Laughing, she put her palm firmly between Sylvia's shoulder blades and propelled her toward the door. "Your little girl's settling down to her new school just fine. You don't worry, now. Hear? Come on over here, Maddy. Your momma's waiting on you."

Outside, Maddy ran for her father's arms. He lifted her high, then brought her down to eye level. "How's my pumpkin? How's my little girl?"

Maddy opened her mouth and pointed at her throat.

"Soon," he said. "We're eating Chinese food tonight. Yum. At a restaurant. How's that?"

She nodded emphatically, then gave him a quick hug and squirmed to

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be let down. They had always been close, father and daughter. Sylvia pulled her coat tighter and buttoned the collar. Snow had begun to fall.

They walked down 73rd Street. Maddy ran ahead and waited at the corner. "She was never this quiet back home. Back in Eugene," Sylvia said. "I'm worried about her."

"She's fine," Dick said. He covered his head with his newspaper as they came to the corner. Maddy motioned for him to bend over. She stroked his chin, then wiggled her stubby fingers. Dick laughed. "I've told you a thousand times. I shaved because we moved to New York. Men don't wear beards in New York." He took her hand and they started across the street.

"Wait for the green," Sylvia called, then started across herself. A cab roared through the intersection. It squeeled its brakes and swerved, spraying the sidewalk with black slush, missing her by inches.

Late in the Cretaceous period, about 100 million years ago, the Arctic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico were connected by a vast shallow sea dividing North America in two. "Look at this, Maddy," Sylvia called, holding the picture book open on her lap. There was a diagram showing east and west America split by a ribbon of water as if a great tongue had licked the continent from Corpus Christi to Tuktoyaktuk on the Mackenzie Bay. If Columbus had sailed 100 million years ago, if it was 100 million years ago now, they would have had to cross that ocean to reach New York. They would probably be speakers of separate language, visitors from a foreign land. "Maddy?"

She had fallen asleep on the rug by her dollhouse. "I'll get her," Sylvia said, although Dick had not moved from his chair. He looked embedded there, corporate tax forms piled high by his feet, on his lap, on the coffee table by his side. She pictured a paleontologist of the future working with pick and brush to extricate his fossilized remains from the easy chair, chipping with terrible patience at reams of petrified IRS returns, an impossible task, hopeless.

She put Madeline to bed, then returned to the sofa and sat with her feet tucked under her. The book was still open to the same page. She traced the diagram of the inland sea with her fingertip, then looked to the illustration on the facing page, an artist's rendering of the scene. Brontosaurs wallowed in the shallows, munching on the top leaves of giant palms. Crested pteranodons glided above the calm slate waters on leathery twelve-foot wings.

"I wish you wouldn't put so much of your time into reading that stuff, Syl," Dick said. "We need to take a forward-looking approach to our new life here. If plants and animals were what we wanted, we could have looked for a place in the suburbs, Scarsdale

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or White Plains or something."

"Sorry." She shut the book and put it by her side. It was, after all, only a child's picture book, and she was tired; it had been a long day. Her hands wanted to open the book again, and so she clasped them on her lap and watched Dick tap his pipe in the ashtray. She wished it was warm enough to open a window. She had enjoyed the smell of his tobacco in the house in Eugene, but it seemed cloying here in the apartment. She wondered if it had to do with the size of the rooms, or if it was some basic incompatibility of smoke with New York air, which had a flavor and density of its own.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

"Pardon? On this planet? In this room?"

"I don't know what I was thinking about." Her hand fluttered in the air. "I'm sorry. You're in the middle of something."

"No." He put aside the paper he'd been reading and looked at her. "We haven't been keeping proper track of our emotional inventory the past weeks, have we?" he asked. "How have you been getting along?"

"Okay, I guess. A little crazy. I can't seem to get my feet on the ground." The understatement of the era. The largest dinosaurs were reputed to have had two brains, one in their head and another at the base of their tails. Sylvia felt as if she had half a dozen or more, each in contention with the others, all shouting out of turn. She tilted her head back against the sofa cushions and closed her eyes.

"I suppose we have to expect a certain restructuring of our day-to-day experience here. Any luck with the job hunt?"

"No." She shook her head side to side without lifting it from the cushion. "No luck, no promises, no hope. No, no, no." She felt a shiver of giddy exhaustion.

"I hope you won't allow that incident in the subway to impact negatively on your attitude toward living here."

"It's not that. It's —" Her mind was empty. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, the seams in the plaster visible through the new coat of white paint. Not a single word would come.

"Sometimes," he said, and something in his voice made her look at him, "sometimes you have to stop being yourself so much, so that you can be yourself *here*, yourself in New York. It's not the same, psychologically speaking."

"I love you no matter where we are," she said. She put her head back on the cushion and closed her eyes. She should go to bed, she thought, or she would drift to sleep right here. She heard him shuffling papers, getting back to work.

"You'll find a job," he said. "Expertise is always marketable. And over the long term, I think you'll find you like living in New York. It's an exciting place. Alive."

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Sylvia smiled, nodded. She too thought of New York as alive at times, a huge sluggish animal of asphalt and stone, slowly but surely digesting them all. She wanted to tell Dick how correct he was.

"I wonder what I'd know about you," he said, "if I could read your mind."

"I wonder what I'd know about me," she murmured.

Sylvia woke in the dark. She felt Richard sitting up in the bed beside her. He cried out, a cry of loss rather than pain, a frightened, anguished sound. She sat up, held his arm firmly and put her other hand on the back of his neck. She called his name. He cried out again, more quietly this time, then fell limply back onto the bed. After a moment, he whispered, "Again?"

She nodded, then realized that it was too dark for him to see. "Yes." It was the third time in the last four nights.

"It's all right," he mumbled, turning on his side away from her. "Never mind." He shook off her hand, hugged his pillow to his stomach.

Sometimes she felt she knew him as well as she knew herself. Better. But sometimes she found herself watching him suspiciously, wondering if he was about to metamorphose into something entirely unexpected, imagining that she might wake up some morning beside a stone, or a bird, or a clipboard.

"Richard?" she called softly. Already he was asleep.

The weather report predicted a cold day. Sylvia laid Maddy's clothes out on the sofa — underwear, warm pants, turtleneck sweater — and went to cook breakfast. By the time the oatmeal was done, Maddy was dressed and playing on the living room floor with her Raggedy Ann doll. She flew the doll in figure-eights through the air, making buzzing engine noises and laughing. At the table, she propped it up by her plate while she ate.

"Going to be one cold day," Sylvia said, as if to herself. "Looks like snow." Maddy looked at her doll, the cloth face, the idiotic smile, and shook her head slowly, sadly. The doll, with Maddy's hand behind it, commiserated with a shake of its own.

Dick came out of the bedroom tucking in his shirt. He sat at the table, full of bluster and good cheer. "You have to prioritize your life," he said, banging the table with his fist. "Know what you want and take it." He reached over and pinched Maddy's cheek, and she giggled.

They left at the same time, Maddy and Dick. Sylvia put the dishes away and left a few minutes after. She didn't like being in the apartment alone. She felt uneasy there, despite the window gates and police lock. To her mind, protection implied the need for protection, which in turn implied danger. The locks and bars made her feel like a

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morsel, a nutmeat ripe within its shell.

She stopped at the coffee shop on the corner, as she did every morning, and ordered a cup of tea. She held the cup in both hands, the heat in her palms, and looked into the tea. She saw shapes in the steam, animals rearing on their hind legs, strange birds in flight. She closed her eyes and felt herself rising with the steam, a bird soaring up on a column of warm air.

A man stood at the corner of 71st Street and Second Avenue. He was young, in his early twenties. He was dressed in ill-fitting clothes, and he wore no socks, although it was a very cold day. Above the black stubble on his cheeks, his skin was pale. "For God's sake!" he shouted at the passers-by. "For God's sake!" Sylvia paused to watch him. Others looked away as they walked past. "What's the matter with everyong?" he yelled, rocking from one foot to the other, coming dangerously near the edge of his balance. "Why doesn't anybody help? What's going on here?" He began to cry.

"I'll help," Sylvia said. She stood a few steps away from him, afraid to come closer. "Do you need food? Money? Are you — What can I do?"

At each question he tried to speak, then shook his head. Sylvia felt embarrassed. She went over and shook his arm gently, shocked by how thin it felt through his sleeve. "Do you need a doctor? Just nod. There's a restaurant over here. Can I buy you lunch?" She felt like a supplicant, as if she was more helpless than he. He waved his hand as if to motion her away. She found a ten dollar bill in her purse and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Quick," he said. "How do you feel?"

"What?" She stepped back.

"Don't think. Damnit, you're losing it." He took a pen and a small dog-eared notebook from an inside pocket. "What was your feeling at the moment you gave me the money? How about guilt? Would you say you were feeling very guilty, fairly guilty, slightly guilty, or not at all —"

Sylvia grabbed the notebook from his hand and threw it into the street. It vanished under the flow of cars. She watched a few loose pages pinwheel down the street, then turned her back and started away. "Why did you do that?" he called plaintively behind her. "What the hell was that for?"

By the time she reached the next corner, he was yelling. "Just try to get your ten bucks back, bitch."

It was 10:15; her appointment for an interview at the city's Agency for Child Development was for 11. She stopped at her bank, handed the teller her check and ID. He stared at her Oregon driver's license. "We've only been here a month," she explained. He looked from the picture on her license to her face, then back at the license. "Am I still me?" she asked, smiling. He pushed the money toward her across

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the counter. He looked at her as if he could see the wall behind her, as if she wasn't there.

She left the bank at 11:05. At first she assumed that her watch had somehow leapt ahead an extra half hour. She tapped the crystal face with her finger, then went back inside the bank. The clock on the wall and her watch agreed perfectly — 11:05, now 11:06. It was impossible. She knew that she had been in the bank for perhaps ten minutes, fifteen at the most. She stood there looking from one timepiece to the other, trying to reconcile her memory with the uncompromising hour.

Outside, she walked slowly down Second Avenue, trying to think. She went past a pay phone, glanced at her watch. She was already ten minutes late. There was no excuse that she could think of, nothing for her to say. The ACD office was in the City Hall building on Church Street at the southern tip of Manhattan, a twenty-minute ride by cab. She began to walk more quickly, as if she could cover the ninety-four blocks on foot, as if she could arrive ten minutes before she started. She didn't notice the yellow rope lying across the sidewalk between 66th and 67th, barely saw the workman standing in the street, or heard the faint sound of the cable snapping five floors above. Still, all these signals came together somewhere in her mind, and she stopped short just as the piano fell.

It was a Steinway grand with a beautiful ebony finish. It fell five stories in a second and a half, smashing to the ground with a demented, tortured chord, a lunatic twang. For a moment, the air seemed full of flying wood and wire, and then everything was still, and Sylvia was standing there, untouched, with wreckage strewn all around.

The workman had fallen in the street. Now he pushed himself to his feel and staggered over to her, clutching his shoulder. He sat on the collapsed piano frame, lowering himself gingerly onto it as if it was a delicate and valuable heirloom.

"Are you all right?" Sylvia asked.

He peeked under the hand at his shoulder, then shrugged. "Not good, not bad," he said. "Jeanie, that's my youngest, she had her wisdom teeth pulled Wednesday, and now she sips her food through a straw and moans constantly. It's driving my wife crazy. And Billy, that's my second-oldest, he writes to me from school that he must have two hundred dollars to join a fraternity. My feeling is that for two hundred dollars he should forget fraternity and look for love, but I suppose that's what children are for. And you?"

"I don't know," Sylvia said. "This city— It's been doing something to me. To all of us, my husband, and my daughter, and me."

"This something — could you be a little more specific?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Yes," he said, nodding thought-

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fully. "I recall that you made the same point just a moment ago."

"Everything is strange and unsettled," she said. "Everything has to do with uncertainty and —"

"And?"

"Change. I've been thinking a lot about change."

"I have fifteen cents," he told her.

A woman came out of the luncheonette across the street. "I've called an ambulance," she called to them. "They'll be here in a minute. Don't move. They'll be right here."

"I'll be leaving now," Sylvia told the workman. "I learned yesterday that I don't like ambulances."

"It's good to learn something new every day." He blinked, looked around as if seeing the ruined piano for the first time. "So much for wings of song."

"I like you," she said. "You're the first person I've found here that I like."

He shrugged. "You'll find everything in this city, sooner or later. Everything is here."

Richard called to say that he'd be late for dinner. "Incidentally," he said, "I forgot to mention it this morning. I like your hair blonde."

"I am blonde, Dick. I've always been blonde."

"Ah." There was a pause. "Well, I didn't say you weren't."

Maddy was playing with her dolls when Sylvia tiptoed to the door and looked in. It had become a habit with her to approach Maddy's room quietly, almost stealthily, hoping to surprise her daughter in surreptitious talk. Now, standing at the door, she felt ashamed. "Come on sweetheart," she said. "I'll read you a book."

Maddy paused, a doll in each hand, and frowned with the effort of deciding. She shook her head, no.

"Your new dinosaur book," Sylvia said. Maddy didn't bother to answer; she had already handed down her decision. "I'll be in the living room if you change your mind."

Sylvia sat on the sofa and read about the extinction of the dinosaurs. According to the book, it was a mystery that no one could adequately explain. At one moment of geologic time, they had covered the earth and filled the sky in all their grandiose reptilian glory, and the next moment they were gone, every one, almost before the rocks took notice. Sylvia became sad reading about it, and she turned back the pages to the earlier pictures, stegosaurs lumbering through the dense wet forests, pteranodons gliding through cloudless pink skies on wide membranous wings. She read until it was time to start dinner, and put the book reluctantly aside.

She thought about change while she chopped cabbage on a board laid over the kitchen sink, different kinds of changes: the shifting of colors beneath her eyelids at night, the changes of distance, of time. The long knife

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winked, rocking on its point. They were changing, Richard and Madeline, and she had to change as well, or she would die as the dinosaurs had died. She wondered what sort of fossils she would leave behind. She wondered if Richard would keep her in memory, with what color hair, and if the snapshot of her would remain taped to Maddy's wall.

She looked down. The cabbage was chopped past the point of coleslaw, past the point of any use that came to mind.

She left the knife on the cutting board and went into Maddy's room. "Want to play house?" Maddy smiled, nodded. She was always hungry for partners at house. Sylvia knelt beside her and stroked her hair. Maddy thrust a doll into her hands impatiently, as if to say that this was no time for petty affection. Sylvia walked the doll to the front of the ramshackle dollhouse that Dick had built in Eugene from scraps of lattice and dowel. "Is anybody home?" she said, falsetto. "I'm a blind person looking for the Clay's house. Is this it? Is anyone here?"

Maddy put her doll by the doorway and mimed opening a door.

"I heard something," Sylvia said, "but I'm blind. I can't see. Who is it?"

Maddy's doll paused as if considering; then it gently touched the shoulder of Sylvia's doll.

Sylvia's doll moved back. "Don't push. You're scaring me. Please tell me who you are."

Maddy left her doll on the floor of the dollhouse and sat hugging her knees. Sylvia touched her cheek. "Just one word. Your name. What you'd like for dinner tonight. Just to let me know you can." Maddy put her thumb in her mouth and closed her eyes. She looked to Sylvia like a three-year-old, like a two-year-old, like a newborn babe.

When Sylvia heard Dick's key in the lock, she went to stand in the hallway by the door. He looked tired when he came in, his shoulders hunched as if the weight of the briefcase was more than he could bear. She pictured how she must look to him, arms crossed, spatula in hand, hair awry, apron bloodied with tomato sauce. "We have to do something about Maddy," she said. He blinked and looked past her toward the living room, but she would not stand out of his way. "She doesn't talk. Do you understand? There's something wrong with her. It's more than just shyness or reticence; she doesn't use words at all."

He let the door swing shut behind him and dropped his briefcase on the floor. "Of course she does," he said. "Come out here for a minute, Maddy. Come on, pumpkin. Say something to your mom." Maddy came out of her bedroom, thumb in her mouth, Raggedy Ann doll dragging behind. "Tell your mom ... oh, how school was today."

Maddy looked from him to Sylvia. She took her thumb from her mouth.

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"Yashut," she said quietly. "Fortung pith quasley fass. Feezee un mung."

"You see?" He peeled off his coat and hung it in the closet. "God, I'm tired." He eased himself into his customary chair and closed his eyes, his right hand groping for his pipe in the ashtray.

"Dick," Sylvia said in the careful, even voice that a parent might employ in explaining life to a child. "Maddy is not speaking English. She is not speaking any language known to any creature on this planet except herself. It was pretend. It wasn't real."

"Absolutely. She's more innovative than half the people in my department."

"Yes, but did you understand what she said?"

"Of course." He looked at her with surprise. "Didn't you?"

He woke up shouting again that night, his skin damp with sweat. Sylvia held his arm until it was over. "What was it?" she asked. "Please." He wouldn't reply, and a minute later he was asleep.

Sylvia found herself staring into the darkness. She moved the box of tissues on the night table, uncovering the face of the digital clock. It was 3:18. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, counting seconds, minutes. Finally she climbed out of bed and left the room, guided by the cold blue glow of the numerals.

She went into the living room and sat in the easy chair, Dick's chair, in the dark. The seat was too wide for her, the armrests too far apart. She shifted uncomfortably, leaned against the armrest to her left. She tried to think about important matters, life, change, and found herself staring at the crisscross shadow on the ceiling, the window gates. Home, she told herself firmly, speaking to her loneliness, her confusion, her fear. This is home.

She left the apartment in the morning with no destination in mind, walking wherever the streets took her — south down Second Avenue, west on 66th, south again on Third Avenue, and so on, making her way diagonally across the city. The air was filled with the music of the city, the clicking, buzzing, shrieking jam of people and machines, the smells of cigarettes, and food, and gasoline fumes. Sylvia walked on, waiting for some sense of it all to reach her, hoping to discover her part, her place.

The day had started with clear skies, but as she walked, dark clouds blew over the horizon from the west. Watching them move in, she imagined a rain of pianos plummeting to the ground, fortissimo (and briefly considered a reign of pianos — "Ladies and gentlemen, our leader, the honorable and upright Baldwin."). The clouds spread across the sky, casting premature dusk through the streets. She wondered if time played tricks in the city, if time could be as desultory as

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weather here, Precambrian in the morning, Mesozoic in the afternoon, with patches of October in the west. Time was like a heartbeat in the city, she thought, an internal rhythm with only vague and half-felt connections to the sweep of time in the universe outside, the earth rotating through its days and revolving through its seasons, the oscillations of an atom of cesium-133. Instead of clouds, those could be hours or eons thickening in the sky.

She was strolling down a quiet residential street in the west 30's, daydreaming about time and the heartbeat of the city, when she first had the sense of being followed. She stopped and looked around; there were only a handful of pedestrians in sight, none familiar. She shook her head and went on, but something in her mood had changed, in her outlook on the day. She began to tire, to feel the cold, and the muscles in her legs were tight. She no longer had any clear idea of what she'd intended when she started out that morning. At the next corner she turned north, uptown, and started back to the apartment.

It came to her again as she walked down 36th, the sensation that someone was behind her. She stopped in the middle of the block and waited, watching, listening for sounds at the edge of her hearing. There was no one in sight at the moment. She looked at the windows of the houses. The row of brownstones across the street seemed slumped over in their places like tired old men with half-open eyes, long cracks in the stones like the creases in aged flesh. She wondered if that was where the feeling was coming from, all the windows, and she smiled at herself, her foolishness, a nervous smile. Steam rose like hot breath from an open manhole at the end of the block. There was nothing behind her but the city.

She began to walk again, but the feeling persisted that something was there, keeping its distance like the reflection of the moon on a lake. The feeling grew until she could no longer laugh at it, even nervously, and it became fear. On Sixth Avenue she found herself among people again, and she told herself that it was all right, there were people around her now, but her heart was leaping in her chest. It made no sense, but she was done with trying to make sense of the city. It was watching her with hungry eyes. She imagined it rising up around her, tongue of asphalt, jaws of stone. She imagined it opening beneath her feet. The sidewalk shivered as a subway car passed under her, and she started to run.

She ran until there was no more breath in her, knowing that the city was running behind her, ahead of her, knowing that there was nowhere to go. Finally all her air was gone, and she stopped, head down, hands on her knees, all her mind in her pulse. "Look," someone said. "Look at her. Look."

Sylvia was changing, slowly at first

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so that it seemed no more than a trick of light, and then faster and faster. Her skin grew grey and leathery. Her bones became hollow and light and changed in their proportions to each other so that she was forced to stoop over, to crouch. Her skull swept back, a plume of bone, and her mouth stretched into a long bill, hard and slender. She started to speak, but whatever the thought was, it was lost in the making. All thought was difficult for her now. Her arms withered while the small finger of each of her hands lengthened until they touched the sidewalk. A thick membrane grew between her arms and her body, hanging in folds from armpit to ankle. She began to stagger on her tiny feet, so unsuitable for the ground, and she looked around her in panic, looking past the bodies surrounding her, looking for the sky. Her great wings opened at her sides, rising high above her shoulders, and as she stepped forward she brought them down and they billowed as they caught the air and flung her toward the sky.

It was Dick's idea that they go to the Museum of Natural History that Saturday. They strolled past totem poles and insects, primates and meteorites. Dick stood beneath a life-sized model of a blue whale suspended from the ceiling in the Hall of Marine Life. "This is the sort of asset that you find only in a place like New York," he said. "This is the sort of benefit that makes it emotionally cost-effective to live here." He blew Sylvia a kiss, tousled Maddy's hair.

Maddy looked tired, worn out by running from room to room ahead of them, disappearing for minutes at a time. "Hambur," she said, her cheek resting against Sylvia's hip. "Amburg." She had been speaking in recognizable word fragments since waking that morning.

"There's a cafeteria in the basement," Sylvia said. "You two go ahead. I'll be along in a minute."

The dinosaurs were on the fourth floor in a room without windows. The walls were institutional green. Sylvia made her way through the crowd, passing by the bones of hadrosaurs and pteranodons laid out in beds of plaster. She looked at them coldly and moved on. She stopped by a glass case in which was sprawled the mummified body of a pterosaur, the brittle black skin flush against the bones, the limbs askew, twisted not by agony but by geological disorder and the decsicating years. She sniffed, but the only odor she smelled was a faint whiff of smoke from a fugitive cigar. She walked to the center of the room where two large skeletons stood erect on a concrete platform behind a wooden rail, Trachodon and Tyrannosaurus, the tops of their skulls inches from the eighteen-foot-high ceiling. Their bones were grey rather than white, etched with deep lines, empty of marrow. Sinuous metal poles embedded in the concrete

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rose to support the long spines and massive heads. The poles looked alive, curving around hips and ribs to find each strategic place of support. Sylvia imagined them suddenly gone, imagined the bones crashing to the floor, splintering like glass.

She found Dick and Maddy at a table in the cafeteria and sat across from them. Maddy was full of energy again. Dick, sitting beside her, looked overworked and tired, in need of a more substantial rest than he could find in a single weekend. "Something wrong?" he asked Sylvia.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Let me have a bite." She reached for Maddy's hot dog, and Maddy yanked it away, laughing, flinging sauerkraut across the floor. Dick stood up.

"Let it stay," Sylvia said, making faces across the table at her daughter. "They'll clean it up. That's what we pay for."

Sylvia, walking home from the grocery store, noticed the little man nearly a block away. He was less than four feet tall, and his head was bald, pink, and astoundingly round. He fell into step beside her, the hem of his tattered shearling coat slapping at his ankles as he hurried to keep pace with her. "Please," he said in a breathless high voice. "Anything you can spare. A nickel, a penny. Anything at all. Please?"

Sylvia shifted the bag of groceries to her other arm and walked quickly on. A memory of him kept coming back to her that evening, a picture of his pie-pan face smiling up at her, beaming with hope while she ate her dinner, washed the dishes, sat before the TV.

Sylvia woke in the night to the sound of Dick's cries. She tried to calm him as she had the other times. When it was over, they lay in the darkness together, his skim damp with sweat, her head resting on his chest. She listened to the uneven sound of his breath for a minute. When he climbed out of bed, she followed him into the living room and sat on the sofa. She noticed how well he fit the easy chair, how exactly he filled that space.

"Perhaps," Dick said. He paused to clear his throat. "Perhaps we shouldn't have come here. Perhaps it was a negative ... a mistake. A place like this is — I don't — Maybe you were right."

She tsked at him. "Don't be silly. Everything's fine now. It's only sleepiness that's making you sad." She went over and sat on his lap, curling up to rest her head on his chest as if they were still in bed.

"It isn't the way I thought it would be," he said. "Everything has changed. You've —" He hit the armrest with his fist. "Damn," he said. "Damn!"

She snuggled against his chest again, leaned her head up to kiss the crook of his neck. "You'll get used to it," she said.

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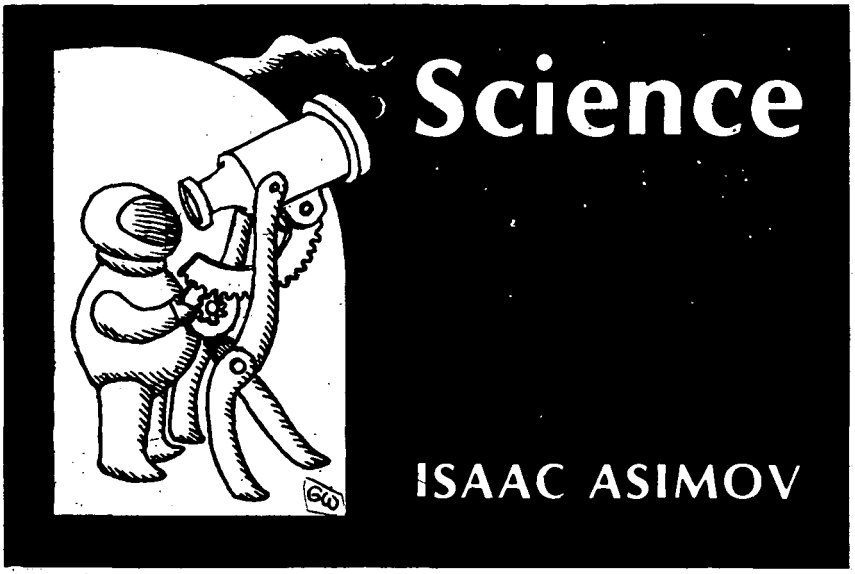

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

AND AFTER MANY A SUMMER DIES THE PROTON

If any of you aspire to the status of Very Important Person, let me warn you sulkily that there are disadvantages. For myself, I do my best to avoid VIP-dom by hanging around my typewriter in a state of splendid isolation for as long as possible. And yet — the world intrudes.

Every once in a while, I find myself slated to attend a grand function at some elaborate hotel, and the instructions are "black tie." That means I've got to climb into my tuxedo. It's not really very difficult to do so, and once I'm inside it, with the studs and links in place, with the tie hooked on and the cummerbund adjusted, I don't feel very different. It's just the principle of the thing. I'm not a tuxedo person; I'm a baggy-old-clothes person.

Just the other night I was slated to appear, tuxedo-ablaze-in-glory at the Waldorf-Astoria. I had been invited — but I had not received any tickets.

Whereupon I said to Janet (who made her usual wifely-suggestion that she seize her garden shears and cut great swatches out of my luxuriant sideburns and received my usual husbandly-refusal), "Listen, if we get there and they won't let us in without tickets, please don't feel embarrassed. We'll just leave our coats in the checkroom, go down two flights to the Peacock Alley and eat there."

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In fact, I was hoping we'd be turned away. Of all the restaurants I've tried in New York, the Peacock Alley is my favorite. The closer we got to the hotel, the more pleasant was my mind's-eye picture of myself wreaking havoc with the comestibles at the Peacockian festive board.

. Finally, there we were, standing before a group of fine people who barred the way to the Grand Ballroom, with instructions to keep out the riff-raff.

"I'm sorry," I said, firmly, "but I don't have any tickets."

Whereupon a clear whisper sounded from one young woman on the other side of the table, "Oh, my goodness! Isaac Asimov!"

And instantly, Janet and I were hustled into the VIP-room and my hopes for the Peacock Alley went a-glimmering.*

So let us turn by an easy progression of thought, to that VIP of the subatomic particles: the proton.

Fully 90 percent of the mass of that portion of the Universe of which we are most aware — the stars — consists of protons. It is therefore apparently fair to say that the proton is the very stuff of the Universe and that if anything deserves the rating of Very Important, it is the proton.

Yet just in the last year or so, the proton's proud position on the throne of subatomic VIP-dom has been shaken.

In the first place, there is the possibility (see NOTHING AND ALL, February 1981) that it is not the proton after all that is the stuff of the Universe, but the neutrino, and that the proton makes up only a very inconsiderable portion of the Universal mass.

In the second place, it is possible that the proton is not even immortal, as has long been thought, but that after many a summer each one of the little things faces decay and death even as you and I.

But let's start from the beginning.

At the moment, there seem to be two fundamental varieties of particles: leptons and quarks (see GETTING DOWN TO BASICS, September 1980).

There are different sorts of leptons. First, there are the electron, the muon, and the tauon (or tau-electron). Then, there are the mirror-image particles, the anti-electron (or positron), the anti-muon and the anti-tauon. Then, there is a neutrino associated with each of the above: the electron-nuetrino, the muon-neutrino, and the tauon-neutrino, plus, of course, an anti-neutrino for each.

**It was all right. It was a very good banquet and a lot of fun.*

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That means 12 leptons altogether that we know of, but we can simplify the problem somewhat by ignoring the anti-particles, since what we have to say about the particles will hold just as firmly for the anti-particles. Furthermore, we will not try to distinguish between the neutrinos since there is a good chance that they oscillate and swap identities endlessly.

Therefore let us speak of 4 leptons — the electron, muon, tauon and neutrino.

Different particles have different rest-masses. For instance, if we set the rest-mass of the electron at one, the rest-mass of the muon is about 207, and that of the tauon is about 3600. The rest-mass of the neutrino, on the other hand, may be something like 0.0001.

Mass represents a very concentrated form of energy, and the general tendency seems to be for massive particles to change spontaneously, into less massive particles.

Thus, tauons tend to break down into muons, electrons and neutrinos and to do it quickly, too. The half-life of a tauon (the period of time during which half of them will have broken down) is only about five trillionths of a second (5×10^{-12} seconds).

Muons, in turn, break down to electrons and neutrinos, but since muons are less massive than tauons they seem to last a bit longer and have half-lives of all of 2.2 millionths of a second (2.2×10^{-6} seconds).

You might expect that electrons, then, might live a little longer still, and break down to neutrinos, and that neutrinos, after a perhaps quite respectable lifetime, might melt away to complete masslessness, but that's not the ways it works.

Leptons can't disappear altogether, provided we are dealing with particles only, or anti-particles only, and not a mixture of the two. An electron and an anti-electron can combine and mutually annihilate, converting themselves into zero-mass photons (which are not leptons), but that's another thing and we're not dealing with it.

As long as we have only particles (or only anti-particles), leptons must remain in existence; they can shift from one form to another, but cannot disappear altogether. That is "the law of conservation of lepton number" which also means that a lepton cannot come into existence out of a non-lepton. (A lepton *and* its corresponding anti-lepton can simultaneously come into existence out of non-leptons, but that's another thing.) And don't ask *why* lepton number is conserved; it's just the way the Universe seems to be.

The conservation of lepton number means that the neutrino, at least,

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should be immortal and should never decay, since no still-less-massive lepton exists for it to change into. This fits the facts, as nearly as we can tell.

But why should the electron be stable, as it seems to be? Why doesn't it break down to neutrinos? That would not violate the law of conservation of lepton number.

Ah, but leptons can possess another easily-measurable characteristic, that of electric-charge.

Some of the leptons, the various neutrinos and anti-neutrinos, have no electric charge at all. The others — the electron, the muon and the tauon — all have an electric charge of the same size which, for historical reasons, is considered to be negative and is usually set equal to unity. Each electron, muon and tauon has an electric charge of -1; while every anti-electron, anti-muon and anti-tauon has an electric charge of +1.

As it happens, there is a "law of conservation of electric charge" which is a way of saying that electric charge is never observed to disappear into nothing, or appear out of nothing. No lepton decay can affect the electric charge. (Of course, an electron and an anti-electron can interact to produce photons and the opposite charges, +1 and -1, will cancel. What's more, a lepton and an anti-lepton can be formed simultaneously, producing both a +1 and -1 charge where no charge existed before — but these are different things from those we are discussing. We are talking about particles and anti-particles as they exist separately.

The least massive of the leptons with charge is the electron. That means that though more massive leptons can easily decay to the electron, the electron cannot decay because there is nothing less massive which can hold an electric charge, and that electric charge *must* continue to exist.

To summarize then:

Muons and tauons can come into existence under conditions where the general energy-concentration is locally very high, say, in connection with particle accelerators or cosmic ray bombardment; but once formed, they cannot last for long. Under ordinary conditions, removed from high-energy events, we would find neither muons nor tauons, and the Universal content of leptons is restricted to the electron and the neutrino. (Even the anti-electron does not exist in significant numbers for reasons to be taken up another time.)

Let us pass on next to the other basic variety of particle, the quark. Quarks, like leptons, exist in a number of varieties, but with a number of important differences.

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For one thing, quarks carry fractional electric charges, such as $+\frac{2}{3}$ and $-\frac{1}{3}$. (Anti-quarks have charges of $-\frac{2}{3}$ and $+\frac{1}{3}$, naturally.)

Furthermore, the quarks are subject to the "strong interaction," which is enormously more intense than the "weak interaction" to which leptons are subject. The intensity of the strong interaction makes it unlikely (even, perhaps, impossible) for quarks to exist in isolation. They seem to exist only in bound groups that form according to rules we needn't go into in detail. One very common way of grouping is to have three quarks associate in such a way that the overall electric charge is either 0, 1, or 2 (positive in the case of some, negative in the case of others).

These three-quark groups are called "baryons," and there are large numbers of them.

Again, however, the more massive baryons decay quickly into less massive baryons and so on. As side-products of this decay, mesons are produced which are particles made up of only two quarks. There are no stable mesons. All break down more or less rapidly into leptons, that is, into electrons and neutrinos.

There is, however, a "law of conservation of baryon number" so that whenever a baryon decays, it must produce another baryon whatever else it produces. Naturally, when you get to the baryon of the lowest possible mass, no further decay can take place.

The two baryons of lowest mass are the proton and the neutron, so that any other baryon of the many dozens that can exist quickly slides down the mass scale to become either a proton or a neutron. These two baryons are the only ones that exist in the Universe under the ordinary conditions that surround us. They tend to combine in varying numbers to form the atomic nuclei.

The proton and neutron differ, most obviously in the fact that the proton has an electric charge of +1, while that of the neutron is 0. Naturally, atomic nuclei, which are made up of protons and neutrons, all carry a positive electric charge of quantity equal to the number of protons present. (There are also such things as anti-protons with a charge of -1, and anti-neutrons which differ from neutrons in magnetic properties, and these group together to form negatively-charged nuclei and anti-matter, but never mind that right now.)

The positively-charged nuclei attract negatively-charged electrons in numbers that suffice to neutralize the particular nuclear charge, thus forming the different atoms with which we are familiar. Different atoms, by transferring or sharing one or more electrons, form molecules.

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But the proton and neutron differ slightly in mass, too. If we call the electron's mass one, then the proton's mass is 1836 and the neutron's mass is 1838.

When the two exist in combination in nuclei, they tend to even out their properties and to become, in effect, equivalent particles. Inside nuclei, they can be lumped together and referred to as "nucleons." The entire nucleus is then stable, although there are nuclei where the proton-neutron mixture is not of the proper ratio to allow a perfect evening-out of properties, and which are therefore radioactive — but that's another story.

When the neutron is in isolation, however, it is not stable. It tends to decay into the slightly less massive proton. It emits an electron, which carries off a negative charge, leaving a positive charge behind on what had been a neutron. (This simultaneous production of a negative *and* a positive charge does not violate the law of conservation of electric charge.) A neutrino is also formed.

The mass difference between proton and neutron is so small that the neutron doesn't decay rapidly. The half-life of the isolated neutron is about 12 minutes.

This means that the neutron can exist for a considerable length of time only when it is in combination with protons, forming an atomic nucleus. The proton, on the other hand, can exist all by itself for indefinite periods and can, all by itself, form an atomic nucleus, with a single electron circling it — forming the ordinary hydrogen atom.

The proton is thus the only truly stable baryon in existence. It, along with the electron and the neutrino (plus a few neutrons that exist in atomic nuclei), make up virtually all the rest-mass of the Universe. And since protons outshine the others in either number or individual rest-mass, the proton makes up 90 percent of the mass of such objects as stars. (The neutrinos may be more massive, in total, but they exist chiefly in interstellar space.)

Consider the situation, however, if matters were the other way around and if the neutron were slightly less massive than the proton. In that case, the proton would be unstable and would decay to a neutron, giving up its charge in the form of a positively-charged anti-electron (plus a neutrino). The anti-electrons so formed would annihilate the electrons of the Universe, together with the electric charge of both, and left behind would be only the neutrons and neutrinos. The neutrons would gather, under the pull of their overall gravitational field, into tiny neutron stars, and those would be the sole significant structures of the Universe.

Life as we know it, would, of course, be utterly impossible in a neutron-

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dominated Universe, and it is only the good fortune that the proton is slightly less massive than the neutron, rather than vice versa, that gives us expanded stars, and atoms — and life.

Everything, then, depends on the proton's stability. How stable is it? Our measurements show no signs of proton-decay, but our measurements are not infinitely delicate and precise. The decay might be there but might be taking place too slowly for our instruments to catch it.

Physicists are now evolving something called the "Grand Unified Theory" (GUT), by which one overall description will cover the electromagnetic interaction (affecting charged particles), the weak interaction (affecting leptons), and the strong interaction (affecting quarks and quark-groupings such as mesons and baryons and atomic nuclei).

According to GUT, each of the three interactions is mediated by "exchange particles" with properties dictated by the necessity of making the theory fit what is already known. The electromagnetic exchange particle is the photon, which is a known particle and very well understood. In fact, the electromagnetic interaction is well-described by "quantum electrodynamics" which serves as a model for the rest of the GUT.

The weak interaction is mediated by three particles symbolized as W^+, W^- and Z°, which have not yet been detected. The strong interaction is mediated by no less than eight "gluons," for whose existence there is reasonable evidence, albeit indirect.

The more massive an exchange particle is, the shorter its range. The photon has a rest-mass of zero, so electromagnetism is a very long-range interaction and falls off only as the square of the distance. (The same is true of the gravitational interaction, which has the zero-mass graviton as the exchange particle, but the gravitational interaction has so far resisted all efforts to unify it with the other three.)

The weak-exchange particles and the gluons have considerable mass, however, and therefore the intensity of their influence falls off so rapidly with distance that that influence is measurable only at distances comparable in size to the diameter of the atomic nucleus, which is only a tenth of a trillionth of a centimeter (10^{-13} centimeters) across or so.

GUT, however, in order to work, seems to make necessary the existence of no less than twelve more exchange particles, much more massive than any of the other exchange particles, therefore extremely short-lived and difficult to observe. If they *could* be observed, their existence would be powerful evidence in favor of GUT.

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It seems quite unlikely that these ultra-massive exchange particles can be directly detected in the foreseeable future, but it would be sufficient to detect their effects, if those effects were completely unlike those produced by any other exchange particles. And such an effect does (or, at any rate, *might*) exist.

If one of these hyper-massive exchange particles should happen to be transferred from one quark to another within a proton, a quark would be changed to a lepton, thus breaking both the law of conservation of baryon number and the law of conservation of lepton number. The proton, losing one of its quarks, becomes a positively-charged meson that quickly decays into anti-electrons, neutrinos and photons.

The hyper-massive exchange particles are so massive, however, that their range of action is roughly 10^{-29} centimeters. This is only a tenth of a quadrillionth (10^{-16}) the diameter of the atomic nucleus. This means that the point-sized quarks can rattle around inside a proton for a long, long time without ever getting sufficiently close to one another to exchange a proton-destroying exchange particle.

In order to get a picture of the difficulty of the task of proton-decay, imagine the proton to be a hollow structure the size of the planet Earth, and that inside that vast planetary hollow were exactly three objects, each about a hundred-millionth of a centimeter in diameter — in other words, just about the size of an atom in our world. Those "atoms" would have diameters that represent the range of action of the hyper-massive exchange particles.

These "atoms," within that Earth-sized volume, moving about randomly, would have to collide before the proton would be sent into decay. You can easily see that such a collision is not likely to happen for a long, long time.

The necessary calculation makes it seem that the half-life for such proton decay is ten million trillion trillion years (10^{31} years). After many a summer, in other words, dies the proton — but after many, many, MANY a summer.

To get an idea of how long a period of time the proton's half-life is, consider that the lifetime of the Universe to this point is usually taken as 15,000,000,000 years — fifteen billion in words, 1.5×10^{10} years in exponential notation.

The expected lifetime of the proton is roughly 6 hundred million trillion (6×10^{20}) times that.

If we set the mighty life of the Universe as the equivalent of one second,

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then the expected half-life of the proton would be the equivalent of two hundred trillion years. In other words, to a proton, the entire lifetime of the Universe is far, far less than an eyeblink.

Considering the long-lived nature of a proton, it is no wonder that its decay has not been noted and that scientists have not detected the breakage of the laws of conservation of baryon number and lepton number and have gone on thinking of those two laws as absolutes.

Might it not be reasonable, in fact, to ignore proton-decay? Surely a half-life of 10^{31} years is so near to infinite in a practical sense, that it might as well be taken as infinite and forgotten.

However, physicists can't do that. They must try to measure the half-life of proton decay, if they can. If it turns out to be indeed 10^{31} years, then that is powerful support for GUT; and if it turns out that the proton is truly stable then GUT is invalid or, at the very least, would require important modification.

A half-life of 10^{31} years doesn't mean that protons will all last for that long and then just as the last of those years elapses, half of them will decay at once. Those atom-sized objects moving about in an Earth-sized hollow could, by the happenstance of random movement, manage to collide after a single year of movement, or even a single second. They might, on the other hand, just happen to move about for 10^{100} or even 10^{1000} years without colliding.

Even a 10^{31}-year half-life means there are protons decaying everywhere in the Universe in any given second. In fact, if the half-life of the proton were merely ten thousand trillion years (10^{16} years) there would be enough proton decays going on within our bodies to kill us with radioactivity.

Even with a half-life of 10^{31} years, there would be enough proton decays going on right now to destroy something like thirty thousand trillion trillion trillion protons (3×10^{40}) *every second* in the Universe as a whole, or three hundred thousand trillion trillion (3×10^{29}) every second in our Galaxy alone, or three million trillion (3×10^{18}) every second in our Sun alone, or three thousand trillion (3×10^{15}) every second in Jupiter alone, or three billion (3×10^{9}) every second in Earth's oceans.

This begins to look uncomfortably high, perhaps. Three billion proton decays every second in our oceans? How is that possible with an expected lifetime so long that the entire life of the Universe is very nearly nothing in comparison.

We must realize how small a proton is and how large the Universe is.

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Even at the figures I've given above it turns out that only enough protons decay in the course of a billion years throughout the entire Universe to be equivalent to the mass of a star like our Sun. This means that in the total lifetime of our Universe so far, the Universe has lost through proton-decay the equivalent of 15 stars the mass of the Sun.

Since there are 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (ten billion trillion or 10^{22}) stars in the Universe as a whole, the loss of 15 through proton-decay can easily be ignored.

Put it another way — In one second of the hydrogen fusion required to keep it radiating at its present rate, the Sun loses six times as much mass as it has lost through proton decay during the entire five-billion-year period during which it has been shining.

The fact that, despite the immensely long half-life of the proton, decays go on steadily at all times, raises the possibility of the detection of those decays.

Three billion decays every second in our oceans sounds as though it should be detectable — but we can't study the ocean as a whole with our instruments and we can't isolate the ocean from other possibly obscuring phenomena.

Nevertheless, tests on considerably smaller samples have fixed the half-life of the proton as no shorter than 10^{29} years. In other words, experiments have been conducted where, if the proton's half-life was shorter than 10^{29} years, protons would have been caught in the act of decaying — and they weren't. And 10^{29} years is a period of time only 1/100 the length of 10^{31} years.

That means that our most delicate detecting devices combined with our most careful procedures need only be made a hundred times more delicate and careful in order just barely to detect the actual decay of protons if the GUT is on the nose. Considering the steady manner in which the field of subatomic physics has been advancing this century, this is a rather hopeful situation.

The attempt is being made, actually. In Ohio, the necessary apparatus is being prepared. Something like ten thousand tons of water will be gathered in a salt mine deep enough in the Earth to shield it from cosmic rays (which could produce effects that might be confused with those arising from proton decay).

There would be expected to be 100 decays per year under these conditions, and a long meticulous watch *may*, just possibly, *may*, produce results that will confirm the Grand Unified Theory and take us a long step forward indeed in our understanding of the Universe.

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Jane Yolen's distinctive fantasy stories have appeared in F&SF over the past several years, but here she turns to science fiction with most satisfactory results. The story concerns an underwater project known as Hydrospace IV, which moves in a surprising direction.

The Corridors of the Sea

BY
JANE YOLEN

"He's awfully small for a hero," said the green-smocked technician. He smirked as the door irised closed behind the object of his derision.

"The better to sneak through the corridors of the sea," answered his companion, a badge-two doctoral candidate. Her voice implied italics.

"Well, Eddystone *is* a kind of hero," said a third, coming up behind them suddenly and leaning uninvited into the conversation. "He invented the Breather. Why shouldn't he be the one to try it out? There's only one Breather after all."

"And only one Eddystone," the woman said, a shade too quickly. "And wouldn't you know he'd make the Breather too small for anyone but himself."

"Still, he *is* the one who's risking his life."

"Don't *cousteau* us, Gabe Whitcomb." The tech was furious. "There aren't supposed to be any heroes on Hydrospace. We do this together or we don't do it at all. It's thinking like that that almost cost us our funding last year."

Whitcomb had no answer to the charge, parroted as it was from the very releases he wrote for the telereports and interlab memos, words he believed in.

The three separated and Whitcomb headed through the door after Eddystone. The other two went down the lift to their own lab section. They were not involved with the Breather test, whose techs wore yellow smocks. Rather, they were working on developing the elusive fluid-damping skin.

"Damned jealous Dampers," Whitcomb whispered himself as he stepped through the door. But at the moment

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of speaking, he knew his anger was useless and, in fact, wrong. The Dampers of the lab *might* indeed be jealous that the Breather project had developed faster and come to fruition first. But it should not matter in as compact a group as Hydrospace IV. What affected one, affected all. That was canon here. That was why hero-worship was anathema to them. All except Tom Eddystone, little Tommy Eddystone, who went his own inimitable way and answered his own siren song. He hadn't changed, Gabe mused, in the twenty years they had been friends. The closest friends imaginable, since neither of them were married.

Eddystone was ahead of him, in his bathing suit and tank top, moving slowly down the hall. It was easy for Gabe to catch up. Not only were Eddystone's strides shorter than most, but the recent Breather operation gave him a gingerly gait, as if he had an advanced case of Parkinson's. He walked on the balls of his feet, leaning forward. He carried himself carefully now, compensating for the added weight of the Breather organs.

"Tommy," Gabe called out breathlessly, pretending he had to hurry and wanted Eddystone to wait. It was part of a built-in tact that made such an excellent tele-flak. But Eddystone was not fooled. It was just a game they always played.

Eddystone stopped and turned slowly, moving as if he were going through water. Or mud. Gabe wondered at the strain that showed in his eyes. Probably the result of worry since the doctors all agreed that the time for pain from the operation itself should be past.

"Are you ready for the press conference?" Gabe's question was *pro forma*. Eddystone was always ready to promote his ideas. He was a man who lived comfortably in his head and always invited others to come in for a visit.

A scowl was Eddystone's answer.

For a moment Gabe wondered if the operation had affected Eddystone's personality as well. Then he shrugged and cuffed the little man lightly on the shoulder. "Come on, Tom-the-giant-killer," he said, a name he had invented for Eddystone when they had been in grade school together and Tommy's tongue had more than once gotten them both out of scrapes.

Eddystone smiled a bit and the triple striations under his collarbones, the most visible reminders of the operation, reddened. Then he opened and shut his mouth several times like a fish out of water, gasping for breath.

"Tommy, are you all right?" Gabe's concern was evident in every word.

"I've just been Down Under is all," Eddystone said in his high, reedy voice.

"And..." Gabe prompted.

Eddystone's mouth got thin. "And ...: it's easier Down Under." He suddenly looked right up into Gabe's eyes and reached for his friend's arms. His grip

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was stronger than those fine bones would suggest. Eddystone worked secretly with weights. Only Gabe knew about it. "And it's becoming harder and harder each time to come back to shore."

"Harder?" The question hung between them, but Eddystone did not elaborate. He turned away slowly and once more moved gingerly down the hall towards the press room. He did not speak again and Gabe walked equally silent beside him.

Once in the room, Eddystone went right to the front and slumped into the armed chair that sat before the charts and screen. He paid no attention to the reporters and Hydrospace aides who clustered around him.

Gabe stopped to shake hands with reporters and camera persons he recognized, and he recognized most of them. That was his job, after all, and he was damned good at it. For the moment he managed to take their attention away from Eddystone, who was breathing heavily. But by the time Gabe had organized everyone into chairs, Eddystone had recovered and was sitting, quietly composed and waiting.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Gabe began, then gave a big smile. "Or rather I should say, *friends*, since we have all been through a lot together at Hydrospace IV." He waited for the return smiles, got them, and continued. "Most of you already know about our attempts here at the labs." He gestured to include the aides in his remarks.

"And I know that some of you have made some pretty shrewd guesses as to Dr. Eddystone's recent disappearance. In fact, one of you..." and he turned to speak directly to Janney Hyatt, the dark-haired science editor of the ERA channels, "...even ferreted out his hospital stay. But none of you came close to the real news. So we are going to give it to you straight. Today."

The reporters buzzed and the camera operators jockeyed for position.

"As you can see, Dr. Eddystone is not in his usual three-piece suit." Gabe turned and nodded at the chair. It drew an appreciative chuckle because Eddystone rarely dressed up, jeans and a dirty sweatshirt being his usual fare. He never tried to impress anyone with his physical appearance since he knew it was so unprepossessing. He was less than five feet tall, large nosed, popeyed. But his quick mind, his brilliant yet romantic scientific insights, his ability to make even the dullest listener understand the beauty he perceived in science, made his sweatshirt a uniform, the dirt stains a badge.

"In fact, Dr. Eddystone is wearing his swim suit plus a tank top so as not to offend the sensibilities of any watchers out there in newsland."

Some of the reporters applauded at this but Janney Hyatt scowled. Even the suggestion of sensibilities filled her with righteous indignation, as if Gabe had suggested it was women's sensibilities he was referring to.

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"Dr. Eddystone has been *Down Under*, our designation of the water world around Hydrospace IV. It is his third trip this week and he wore just what you see him in now, minus the tank top of course. He was under for twenty minutes the first time. The second time he stayed under forty minutes. And this last time — Dr. Eddystone?"

Eddystone held his reply until every eye was on him. Then he spoke, his light voice carrying to the back of the room. "I was under sixty minutes. I breathe harder on land now than I do in the sea."

There was bedlam in the room as the reporters jumped up, trying to ask questions. Finally one question shouted above the others spoke for them all. "You mean you were under sixty minutes *without* scuba gear?"

"Without anything," said Eddystone, standing up for effect. "As you see me."

The silence that followed was palpable and Gabe walked into it with his prepared speech. "You know that living under water has always been the goal of this particular Hydrospace lab: living under water *without* mechanical apparatus or bubble cities." It was a slight dig at the Hydrospace labs I, II, and III, and he hoped he would be forgiven it in the flush of their success. "That is what all our experiments, as secret as they have had to be, are all about. Dr. Eddystone headed the project on what we have called the Breather. Dr. Lemar's group has been working on a fluid-damping skin."

Everyone was listening. A few were taking notes. The cameras rolled. Gabe could feel the attention, and continued.

"When we first decided to prepare the bionics to allow a person to breathe water as easily as air, we took a lot of ribbing. Conservative marine biologists dubbed our lab *Eddystone's Folly* and our group the *Cousteau Corporation*. But we knew that the science was there. We had two possible approaches we were considering.

"The first was to implant a mechanical system which would extract the dissolved oxygen from the water and present it directly to the lungs. From there on, normal physiology would take over. The other choice was to implant a biological system, such as gills, from some chosen fish, which would load the blood directly with oxygen, thus by-passing the lungs."

Eddystone sat quietly, nodding at each point Gabe ticked off. Gabe looked around the room for questions. There were none.

"Of course you realize," he continued, "that both systems required the normal functioning of the musculature of breathing: one to pull the oxygen from the apparatus, the other to pass water over the implanted gills."

Janney Hyatt raised her hand and, to soothe her earlier anger at his "sensibilities" remark, Gabe called on her at once.

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"What was the mechanical system to be made of?" she asked.

"Good question," said Gabe. "The earlier bionics experts felt more comfortable with metal, plastics, and electronics. So they opted for a di-oxygenation module, *Doxymod*, which was basically an add-on option for the underwater human. We were going to try it on some dogs first, water dogs, possibly Labradors or a springer spaniel. Trouble surfaced immediately."

Laughter stopped Gabe until he realized his unintentional pun. He smiled and shrugged winningly and went on. "Making a *Doxymod* small enough and light enough was the first problem of course. And once we had produced it — Dr. Eddystone and his staff produced it — we could think of no good reason to implant it. It needed batteries and that meant it had a built-in time limit. Just what we had been trying to avoid. All we had. after all that work, was tankless scuba gear. We were simply replacing the oxygen tanks with batteries. More mobile, perhaps, but...."

"In other words," added one of Eddystone's aides brightly, "not a fail-safe system. Batteries run down and need recharging."

The reporters whispered together. One tentatively raised his hand, but Gabe ignored him. He felt things building and, like any good performer, he knew it was time to continue.

"So we turned to the gill system. Modern medicine had already solved the rejection syndrome, as you know, at least within phylum. Using pigs for heart valves and the like. But we knew nothing about cross-phyla work. We expected a lot of trouble — and were surprised when we encountered very little. Men and fish, it turns out, go well together. Something seafood lovers have long been aware of! In fact, it occurred to one of our bright-eyed tech threes on a dissertation project that we could even produce a classically composed mermaid with a small woman and a large grouper tail. Could — if anyone could think of good reason why, that is."

It drew the laugh Gabe expected. Even Janney Hyatt smiled quickly before reverting to her customary scowl.

Gabe nodded once to his assistant sitting in the far back next to the projector. She caught his signal and dimmed the lights, flicking on the projector at the same time. The first slide focused automatically above Eddystone's head. It was of a large tuna on a white background, with five smaller fish below it. Gabe took up the pointer which had been resting against the table and placed the tip on the blue.

"A lot of time and thought went into the question of whether to use the gills of a human-sized fish like this tuna or an array of smaller gills taken from several fish, perhaps even from different species." He pointed in turn to the other fish on the screen, naming them. "But as often happens in science, the simple solution proved best. Two large

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gills were inserted in the skin, just under the collar bones...." The next slide, a detailed sketch of a human figure, appeared. "And ducts leading from the brachael passages through triunal openings completed the alterations."

The next slides, in rapid succession, were of the actual operation.

"Valves were implanted, special plastic valves, that allowed either the lungs or the gills to be used. These went into the throat."

"So you made an amphibian," called out a grey-haired science writer from the *Times*.

"That was our intention," said Eddystone, standing up slowly. The final slide, of fish in the ocean, had snicked into place and was now projected onto his body. He threw an enormous shadow onto the screen.

Sensing an Eddystone speech, Gabe signaled his assistant with his hand, but she was already ahead of him, flicking off the projector and raising the lights.

"But something more happened. Think of it," said Eddystone. "We can walk on the moon, but not live there. We cannot even attempt a landing on Venus or breathe the Martian air. But the waters of our own world are waiting for us. They cradled us when we took our first hesitant steps into higher phyla. Why even now, in the womb, the fetus floats in *la mer*, the mother sea. Our blood is liquid, our bodies mostly water. We speak of humankind's exodus from the sea as an improvement on the race. But I tell you now that our return to it will be even more momentous. I am not an explorer ... not an explorer taking one giant step for mankind. I am a child going home some million years after leaving."

The speech seemed to have exhausted him. Eddystone slumped back into his chair. Gabe stood over him protectively. But his own thoughts warred with his emotions. Even for Eddystone it was a romantic, emotional outburst. A regular *cousteau*. Gabe knew that he had always been the more conservative of the two of them, but he worried anew that the Breather mechanism might be affecting Eddystone in ways that had not been calculated. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder and was appalled to find it slippery with sweat. Perhaps a fever had set in.

"That's all now, ladies and gentlemen," Gabe said smoothly to the audience, not letting his alarm show. "Tomorrow, tide and time willing, at 0900 hours, we will give you a demonstration of the Breather. Right now Dr. Eddystone has to be run through some last-minute lab tests. However, my assistants will see to it that you receive the information you need for the technical end of your reports. Each pack has scientific and historical details, charts, and a bio sheet on Dr. Eddystone, plus photos from the operation. Thank you for coming."

The reporters dutifully collected

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their material from the aides and tried to bully further answers from the staff while Gabe shepherded Eddystone out the door marked NO ENTRY/TECH ONLY. It locked behind him and would only respond to a code that Hydrospace workers knew.

In the deserted back hall, Eddystone turned. "What last-minute tests?" he asked.

"No tests," Gabe said. "Questions. And I want to do the asking. You are going to give me some straight answers, Tommy. No romances. No *cousteaus*. What's going on? I felt your shoulder in there. It's all sweaty. Are you running a fever? Is there rejection starting?"

Eddystone looked up at him and smiled. "Not rejection," he said, chuckling a bit at a projected joke. "Rather call it an acceptance."

"Make sense, Tommy. I'm a friend, remember. Your oldest friend." Gabe put out his hand as a gesture of good will and was surprised when Eddystone grabbed his hand, for his palm was slick.

Eddystone took Gabe's hand and ran it up and down his arm, across his chest where it was exposed. The gill slits were closed but the tissue was ridged and slightly puckered. Gabe wanted to flinch, controlled it.

"Feel this so-called sweat," Eddystone said. "You can't really see it, but it's there. I thought at first I was imagining it, but now I know. You feel it, too, Gabe. It's not sweat, not sweat at all.

Gabe drew his hand away gently. "Then what the hell is it?"

"It's the body's way of accepting its new life — underwater. It's the fluid-damping skin that Lemar and her kids have been trying for all these months. Seems you can't *build it in*, Gabe. But once the body has been re-adapted for life in the sea, *it just comes*."

"Then we'd better test you out. Tommy. They lab is where you belong now." Gabe started walking.

"No, don't you see," Eddystone said to Gabe's back, "that's *not* where I belong. I belong in the sea." His voice was almost a whisper but the passion in his statement was unmistakable.

"Lab first, Tommy. Or there won't be any 0900 for you — or any of us — tomorrow." Gabe continued to walk and was relieved to hear Eddystone's footsteps following him. He had surprised himself with the firmness of his tone. After all, Eddystone was the head of the lab while he, Gabe, was only the link with outside, with the grants and the news. Yet Eddystone was letting himself be lead, pushed, carried in a way he had never allowed before. As if he had lost his will power, Gabe thought, and the thought bothered him.

They came into the lab and Gabe turned at last. Eddystone was as pale as fishbelly, and starting to gasp again. There was no sign of that strange sweat

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on his body, yet when Gabe took his arm to lead him through the door, he could feel the moisture. The skin itself seemed to be impregnated with the invisible fluid.

The lab was typical of Hydrospace, being half aquarium. It had small enclosed tanks filled with fish and sea life as well as a single wall of glass fronting directly on the ocean. Since the lab was on the lowest Hydrospace floor, resting on ocean bottom, the window let the scientists keep an eye on the fish and plants within the ecosystem without the necessity of diving. For longer, far-ranging expeditions, there were several lab-subs and for divers working within a mile radius of Hydrospace, a series of locks and wet-rooms leading off of the lab. There was no chance of the bends if a diver came and went from the bottom floor of Hydrospace IV.

Only two techs were in the lab, both in their identifying yellow smocks. One was feeding tank specimens, the other checking out the data on the latest mariculture fields. They looked up, nodded briefly, and went back to work.

"Look," Eddystone said to Gabe in a lowered voice, "I'm going to go out there now and I want you to watch through the window. I'll stay close enough for you to track me. Tell me what happens out there. What *you* see. I know what *I* see. But it's like this skin. I need to know someone else sees it, too. When I come back in, you can test all night if you want. But you have to see me Down Under."

Gabe shook his head. "I don't like it, Tommy. Let me get some of the techs. Lemar, too."

Eddystone smiled that crooked grin that turned his homely face into an irrepressible imp's countenance. "Just us, Gabe. The two of us. It's always been that way. I want you to see it first."

Gabe shook his head again, but reluctantly agreed. "If you promise to test...."

"I promise you anything you want," Eddystone answered, a shade too quickly.

"Don't con me, Tommy. I know you too well. Have known you too long. You are the one person who isn't expendable on this project."

"I don't plan to be expended," Eddystone answered, grinning. He walked to the door that led to the series of locks, turned, and waved. "And give those techs," he said, signaling with his head, "give 'em the night off." Then he was gone through the door.

Gabe could hear the sounds of the pressure-changing device, clicking and sighing, through the intercom. He went over to the techs. "Dr. Eddystone wants me to clear the lab for a few hours."

"We were just leaving anyway," said one. To prove she was finished, she reached up and pulled out a large barrette that had held her hair back in a tight bun. As the blondish hair spill-

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ed over her shoulders, she gave Gabe a quick noncommittal smile and shrugged out of the yellow smock. She folded it into a small, neat square and stowed it away in a locker. Her friend was a step behind. Once they had left the lab, Gabe turned on the red neon testing sign over the door and locked it. No one would be able to come in now.

He went to the window and waited. It took ten minutes for anyone to go through the entire series of locks into the water, over a half-hour for the same person to return. The locks could not be overridden manually, though there was a secret code for emergencies kept in a black book in Eddystone's file cabinet. He adjusted the special seaspecs that allowed him to see clearly through pressure-sensitive glass.

Right outside the station grew a hodgepodge of undersea plants. Some had been set in purposefully to act as hiding places for the smaller fish, to entice them closer to the window for easy viewing. Others had drifted in and attached themselves to the sides of the station, to the rock ledges left by the original builders of Hydrospace, to the sandy bottom of the sea.

While Gabe watched, a school of pout swam by, suddenly diving and turning together, on some kind of invisible signal. Though he knew the technical explanations for schooling — that the movement as a unit was made possible by visual stimulation and by pressure-sensitive lateral lines on each fish responding to the minutest vibrations in the water, the natural choreography of schooled fish never ceased to delight him. It was the one *cousteau* he permitted himself, that the fish danced. He was smiling when the school suddenly broke apart and reformed far off to the right of the window, almost out of sight. A dark shadow was emerging from the locks. Eddystone.

Gabe had expected him to swim in the rolling overhand most divers affected. But, instead, Eddystone moved with the boneless insinuations of an eel. He seemed to undulate through the water, his feet and legs moving together, fluidly pumping him along. His arms were not overhead but by his side, the hands fluttering like fins. It was not a motion that a man should be able to make comfortably, yet he made it with a flowing ease that quickly brought him alongside the window. He turned once to stand upright so that Gabe could get a close look at him. With a shock, Gabe realized that Eddystone was entirely naked. He had not noticed it at first because Eddystone's genitals were not visible, as if they had retracted into the body cavity. Gabe moved closer and bumped his head against the glass.

As if the noise frightened him, Eddystone jerked back.

"Tommy!" Gabe cried out, a howl he did not at first recognize as his own. But the glass was too thick for him to be heard. He tried to sign in the shorthand they had developed for divers

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outside the window. But before he could lift a finger, Eddystone had turned, pumped once, and was gone.

The second eyelid lifted and Eddystone stared at the world around him. The softly filtered light encouraged dreaming. He saw, on the periphery of clear sight, the flickerings of fish darting. Some subtle emanation floated on the stream past him. He flipped over, righted himself with a casual cupping of his palms and waited. He was not sure for what.

She came towards him trailing a line of lovers, but he saw only Her. The swirls of sea-green hair streamed behind Her, and there were tiny conch caught up like barrettes behind each ear. Her body was childlike, with underdeveloped breasts as perfect and pink as bubbleshells, and a tail that resembled legs, so deep was the cleft in it. When She stopped to look at him, Her hair swirled about Her body, masking Her breasts. Her eyes were as green as Her hair, Her mouth full and the teeth as small and white and rounded as pearls. She held a hand out to him, and the webbing between Her fingers was translucent and pulsing.

Eddystone moved towards Her, pulled on by a desire he could not name. But there were suddenly others there before him, four large, bullish-looking males with broad shoulders and deep chests and squinty little eyes. They ringed around Her, and one, more forward than the rest, put his hands on Her body and rubbed them up and down Her sides. She smiled and let the male touch Her for a moment, then pushed him away. He went back to the outer circle with the others, waiting. She held up Her hands again to Eddystone and he swam cautiously to Her touch.

Her skin was as smooth and fluid as an eel's, and his hands slipped easily up and over Her breasts. But he was bothered by the presence of the others and hesitated.

She flipped her tail and was away, the line of males behind Her. They moved too quickly for him, and when they left, it was as if a spell was broken. He turned back towards the station.

"Tommy," Gabe's voice boomed into the locks. "I hear you in there. Where did you go? One minute you were here, then you took off after a herd of *Sirenia* and were gone."

The only answer from the intercom was a slow, stumbling hiss. Gabe could only guess that it was Eddystone's breathing readjusting to the air, as the implanted valves responded to the situation. But he did not like the sound, did not like it at all. When the last lock sighed open, he was into it and found Eddystone collapsed on the floor, still naked and gasping.

"Tommy, wake up. For God's sake, get up." He knelt by Eddystone's side and ran his hands under his friend's

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neck. The slipperiness was more apparent than before. Picking him up, Gabe had to cradle Eddystone close against his chest to keep him from sliding away. As Gabe watched, the gill slits fluttered open and shut under Eddystone's collarbone.

"I've got to get you to MedCentral," he whispered into Eddystone's ear. "Something is malfunctioning with the valves. Hold on, buddy. I'll get you through." He ran through the lab and was working frantically to unlock the door without dropping Eddystone when he looked down. To his horror, Eddystone had halfway opened his eyes and one of them was partially covered with a second, transparent eyelid.

"Take me ... take me back," Eddystone whispered.

"Not on your life," Gabe answered.

"It *is* on my life," Eddystone said in that same hoarse croaking.

Gabe stopped. "Tommy."

The membranous eyelid flicked open and he struggled in Gabe's arms. "It calls me," he said. "She calls."

"Jesus, Tommy, I don't know what you mean — she. The sea? I don't even know what you *are*, anymore."

"I am what we were all meant to be, Gabe. Take me back. I can't breathe." His gasping, wheezing attempts at talking had already confirmed that.

Gabe turned around. "If I put you down, could you walk?"

"I don't know. Air strangling me."

"Then I'll carry you."

Eddystone grinned up at him, a grin as familiar as it was strange. "Good. I carried you long enough."

Gabe tried to laugh but couldn't. When they reached the locks, Gabe kicked the door open with his foot. "You're slippery as hell, you know," he said. He needed to say something.

"The better to sneak through the corridors of the sea," said Eddystone.

"God, Tommy, don't *cousteau* me now."

Eddystone shook his head slowly. "But he was right, you know, Jacques Cousteau. The poetry, the romance, the beauty, the longing for the secret other. Someone sang, 'what we lose on the land we will find in the sea.' It's all out there."

"Fish are out there, Tommy. And reefs. And the possibility of vast farms to feed a starving humanity. And sharks. And pods of whale. The mermaid is nothing more than a bad case of horniness or a near-sighted sailor looking at a manatee. Sea creatures don't build, Tommy. There are no houses and no factories under the water. Dolphin don't weave. Dugongs don't tell stories. And whale songs are only music because romantics believe them so. Come on, Tommy. You're a scientist. You know that. Metaphors are words. Words. They don't exist. They don't live."

Eddystone gave him that strange grin once more and threw out an old punch line at him. "You call *this* liv-

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ing?" He tried to laugh but began to wheeze instead.

Gabe punched the lock mechanism with his elbow and the door shut behind them. "I'm going Down Under with you this time, Tommy," he said.

"Yes and no," Eddystone answered cryptically.

Eddystone lay on the bench and watched as Gabe picked out one of the fits-all trunks from a hook. He slipped out of his clothes and got into the swim suit, hanging his clothes neatly on a hanger. When the timer announced the opening of the next lock, he was ready. He picked Eddystone up and walked through into the second room.

Despositing the little man on another bench, Gabe got into the scuba gear. There were always at least six tanks in readiness.

"Remember the first time we learned to dive?" Gabe asked. "And you were so excited, you didn't come off the bottom of the swimming pool until your air just about ran out and the instructor had fits?"

"I don't ... don't remember," Eddystone said quietly in a very distant way.

"Of course you remember, Tommy."

Eddystone did not answer.

They went into the next room, Eddystone leaning heavily on Gabe's arm. This was the first of the two wetrooms, where the water fed slowly in through piping, giving divers time for any last minute checks of their gear.

No sooner had the water started in than Eddystone rolled off the bench where he had been lying down and stretched out on the floor. The rising water puddled around him, slowly covering his body. As it closed over the gill slits in his chest, he smiled. It was the slow Eddystone smile that Gabe knew so well. Eddystone ran a finger in and around the gill slits as if cleaning them.

Gabe said nothing but watched as if he were discovering a new species.

When the door opened automatically, mixing the water in the first wetroom with the ocean water funneled into the second, Eddystone swam in alone. He swam underwater, but Gabe walked along, keeping his head in the few inches of air. In the last lock, Eddystone surfaced for a moment and held a hand out toward Gabe. There was a strange webbing between the thumb and first finger that Gabe could swear had never been there before. Blue veins, as meandering as old rivers, ran through the webbing.

Gabe took the offered hand and held it up to his cheek. Without meaning to, he began to cry. Eddystone freed his hand and touched one of the tears.

"Salt," he whispered. "As salty as the sea. We are closer than you think. Closer than you now accept."

Gabe bit down on his mouthpiece and sucked in the air. The last door opened and the sea flooded the rest of the chamber.

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Eddystone was through the door in an instant. Even with flippers, Gabe was left far behind. He could only follow the faint trail of bubbles that Eddystone laid down, A trail that was dissipated in minutes. There was nothing ahead of him but the vast ocean shot through with rays of filtered light. He kept up his search for almost an hour, then turned back alone.

He quartered the ocean bottom, searching for Her scent. Each minute under washed away memory, 'til he swam free of ambition and only instinct drove him on.

At last he slipped, by accident, into a current that brought him news of Her. The water, touching the fine hairs of his body, sent the message of Her presence to his nerve cells. His body turned without his willing it towards the lagoon where She waited.

Effortlessly he moved along, helped by the current, and scorning the schools of small fish swimming by his side, he raced toward the herd.

If She recognized him, She did not show it, but She signaled to him nonetheless by raising one hand. As he moved towards Her, She swam out to meet him, fondling Her own breasts.

He went right up to Her and She drifted so that they touched, Her face on his shoulder, nuzzling. Then She ran Her fingers over his face and down both sides of his head, a knowing touch. As if satisfied, She moved away, but he followed. He touched Her shoulder. She did not turn, not at first. Then, after a long moment, She rolled and lay face up, almost motionless, looking up at him. She spread apart the two halves of Her tail, exposing a black slit, and arched Her back. The not-quiet-scent struck him again, and all the males began to circle, slowly moving in. She flipped suddenly to an upright position, and a fury of bubbles cascaded from Her mouth. The males moved back, waiting.

She turned to him again, this time swimming sinuously to his side. She ran Her fanned-out right hand down the front of his body, between his legs. He trembled, feeling the pulsing membranes drawing him out. He wanted to touch Her, but could not, some remnants of his humanity keeping him apart.

When he did not touch Her, She swam around him once more, trying to puzzle out the difference. She put Her face close to his, opening Her mouth as if to speak. It was dark red and cavernous, the teeth really a pearly ridge. Two bubbles formed at the corners of Her mouth, then slowly floated away. She had no tongue.

He tried to take Her hand and bring it to his lips, but She pulled away. So he put his hands on either side of Her face and brought Her head to his. She did not seem to know what to do, Her mouth remaining open all the while. He kissed Her gently on the open mouth and, getting no response, pressed harder.

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Suddenly She fastened onto him, pressing Her body to his, Her cleft tail twining on each side of his thighs. The suction of Her mouth became irresistible. He felt as if his soul were being sucked out of his body, as if something inside was tearing. he tried desperately to pull back and could not. He opened his eyes briefly. Her eyes were sea-green, deep, fathomless, cold. Trying to draw away, he was drawn more closely to Her and, dying, he remembered land.

His body drifted up towards the light, turning slowly as it rose. The water bore it gently, making sure the limbs did not disgrace the death. His arms rose above his head and crossed slightly, as if in a dive; his legs trailed languidly behind.

She followed and after Her came the herd. It was a silent processional except for the murmurations of the sea.

When Eddystone's hands broke through the light, the herd rose into a great circle around it, their heads above the water's surface. One by one they touched his body curiously, seeming to support it. At last a ship found him. Only then did they dive, one after another. She was the last to leave. They did not look back.

The press conference was brief. The funeral service had been even briefer. Gabe had vetoed the idea of spreading Eddystone's ashes over the sea. "His body belongs to Hydrospace," Gabe had argued and, as Eddystone's oldest friend, his words were interpeted as Eddystone's wishes.

The medical people were wondering over the body now, with its strange webbings between the fingers and toes, and the violence with which the Breather valves had been torn from their moorings and set afloat inside Eddystone's body. None of it made any sense.

Gabe was trying to unriddle something more. The captain of the trawler that had picked up Eddystone's corpse some eight miles down the coast claimed he had found it because "a herd of dolphin had been holding it up." Scientifically that seemed highly unlikely. But, Gabe knew, there were many stories, many folktales, legends, *cousteaus* that claimed such things to be true. He could not, would not, let himself believe them.

It was Janney Hyatt at the press conference who posed the question Gabe had hoped not to answer.

"Do *you* consider Thomas Eddystone a hero?" she asked.

Gabe, conscious of the entire staff, both yellow and green smocks, behind him took a moment before speaking. At last he said, "There are no heroes in Hydrospace. But if there were, Tommy Eddystone would be one. I want you all to remember this: he died for his dream, but the dream still lives. It lives Down Under. And we're going to make Tom Eddystone's dream come true: we're going to build cities and

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farms, a whole civilization, down under the sea. I think — no, I know — he would have liked it that way."

Out in the ocean, the herd members chased one another through the corridors of the sea. Mating season was over. The female drifted off alone. The bulls butted heads, then body surfed in pairs along the coast. Their lives were long, their memories short. They did not know how to mourn.

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Letters

Naked Girls and Other Goofs

I thought you said that Walotsky was going to stay away from painting women? On the cover of the same issue in which you said that (May 1981) Mr. Walotsky goofed again on his cover for "The Thermals of August."

The girl on the cover appeared to be naked. The author plainly said "My flight suit feels sticky along the small of my back;...." Would it not be assumed that all other kite pilots would also wear kite suits, especially since it would be cold and windy at high altitudes, and a suit would supply a place to attach the kite. The author also mentioned a helmet which the girl on the cover lacks.

While I'm at it, I would like to note a few past errors. In your June 1980 issue you published a story by Reynolds called "Hell's Fire." In this story they needed to stand inside of a large pentagram to "raise hell." For this they used the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The Pentagon is not a pentagram it is a pentagon. A pentagram, also called a pentacle, is a five sided star like is on the American flag.

Then you had a cover for "The Call for the Dead" by Glen Cook on your July 1980 issue. The story said "A pentagram marked the floor surrounding it.", "it" referring to the chair in which the figure sat. On the cover, however, there is a hexagram or a Star of David or a Seal of Solomon *in front of* the chair.

In most ways F&SF is a terrific magazine. Why must you mess it up by being careless as to what you put on your cover? To err is human but editors are not supposed to be human.

One last nit to pick: Don't you think the third or fourth week of March is a bit early for me to receive my May issue of your magazine? That is how early all of my issues of F&SF have been coming lately. If you have a legitimate reason for this please explain.

—Eric Schwarzenbach
Haskell, N.J.

The advance dating is done for the benefit of newsstand wholesalers and retailers, who tend to quickly return unsold any issue that approaches being dated. Thus the May issue is on sale during the month of April and mails to subscribers in mid-March.

Neal Barrett's Planet, Far

I have no idea how much influence you have with Mr. Neal Barrett, Jr. but I hope that you are both able and willing to insist that he continue his writing, which he started so admirably in "A Day at the Fair" in your March 1981 issue of F&SF, about the characters he created (and the environment he created) on the planet Far.

My interest in Science Fiction started over 30 years ago and in all that time I can count the stories that I personally consider SUPERB on one hand ... the Far story line has just joined that group. I consider it equal to or perhaps better than McCaffrey's *Pern* story line and Henderson's *People* story line.

Mr. Barrett's *Far* story reads as if there might have been one or more stories (books?) preceding it ... if so, I can't imagine how I would have missed them. Should there be any more *Far* stories I'd pay a lot to add them to my

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library. *Please* let me know if you know of any and where I might be able to purchase them.

—Verne R. Walrafen
Ozawkie, KS

Neal Barrett, Jr. is now working on a sequel to "A Day at the Fair."

Does "the Labor Day Group" exist?

At the British Easter SF Convention, at Leeds, Tom Disch expanded upon his remarks in F&SF, February 1981 (on 'the Labor Day Group'). I think such a group as he describes does exist: perhaps for two reasons: (1) that writers feel compelled by commercial considerations to produce 'more of the same' (rather than 'something completely different') because assured by their agents, editors, publishers, and readers that such work is more rewarding; and, (2) that, given the relative importance of visual Sci-Fi, writers wish, by regarding their work as propaganda, to draw attention to Science *Fiction*. Is SANDKINGS a re-definition of the genre for a new audience in terms comparable to (for example) NIGHTFALL's original definition?

—A. Tidmarsh
Peterborough, U.K.

Coming up in F&SF: a response to the Disch article by George R.R. Martin.

C. Priest: Exacting or Envious?

Christopher Priest reveals an unseemly amount of jealousy in his attempt to review THE SNOW QUEEN by Joan D. Vinge (F&SF, May 1981); whether because he did not, would not, or could not write a book of comparable power is unclear. Also unpleasant and inexplicable is Priest's failure to even mention a central concern of Vinge's book — women. One might as well try to review a major Cordwainer Smith work without mentioning Underpeople and racism. Instead, Priest carps about Vinge's vocabulary. We were puzzled and disappointed by his review; it didn't do justice to the book, to Vinge, or to Priest himself.

—Paulette Dickerson
& Mark Zimmermann
Silver Spring, MD

As you know from past letters I am pleased by most of the offerings in your magazine. I still think you have the competition beat by a country mile.

I am not too fond of the "GUNSLINGER" series — while I am a fan of Stephen King in the book length, I usually skip his shorter stuff or leave it until last.

The same is true of the book reviews. In reading Christopher Priest's review of Barry Longyear's CITY OF BARABOO I am uncertain whether he is somewhat envious of Mr. Longyear's success upon which he seems to dwell or perhaps it is as Jack Woodford said: "Oftimes critical reviews are like St. Paul's remarks on sex; they indicate a lack of direct experience."

At any rate, keep up the good work. I hope I am around for my subscription renewal in 1984.

—Ben Smith
Kevil, KY

Our next special issue will be on Algis Budrys, but while you're waiting....

I recently did a bit of interior decoration that I thought might amuse you.

Recently, I moved into a larger apartment which allowed me an office for the first time in my career. For inspiration, I mounted on the wall facing my desk all of F&SF's special author's

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issues in chronological order. For further inspiration, and as a private joke, I added an additional cover: the special Marc Scott Zicree issue of August, 1983.

Anyway, I just wanted to share this little bit of auto-entertainment with you. And I'd like you to know that when I'm stuck on some particularly difficult turn of phrase, looking up and seeing those benevolent faces beaming down at me really does help. Thanks.

—Marc Scott Zicree
Los Angeles, CA

More Letters?

It is my opinion that F&SF is the best magazine in the field. F&SF is the only magazine where all the stories are *consistently* good. The only problem is the lack of a letter column. All the letters which you did print in the three columns you printed last year were highly literate, and written at a standard approaching that of your stories. Clearly your editorial taste in choosing letters is as good as your taste for stories.

I feel that it is good for a magazine to provide a forum for constructive criticism. Authors may feel that they are benefited by the criticism they receive (good or otherwise) in a letters feature. However, the main reason for having a letter column is to entertain or stimulate the readers. The letters you printed last year did both of these to me. All I ask is that you make the column a monthly feature.

Possibly it would be a good idea to lay down standards for your letter column. State clearly what you think this column would be like and should be like.

Congratulations on the outstanding excellence of your November & December issues, particularly "Autopsy." F&SF is one publication I can always turn to for well-written, enjoyable stories.

—Mark Bahnisch
Kerdon, Australia

We do receive enough mail to print a monthly letters column, however I feel that most of it is not of enough interest to publish. I would like to use a letters column more frequently, but I do not want to fill it with hasty and superficial letters of praise, which, while appreciated, is the nature of much of the mail that we receive. The ideal letter is, as you say, either entertaining or stimulating, or it offers some reasoned praise or criticism of a story or an article. When I get more such letters, I will rush to publish them.

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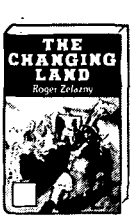

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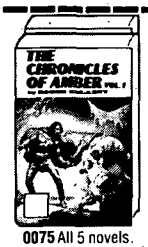

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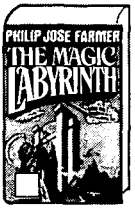

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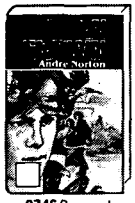

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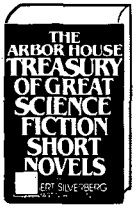

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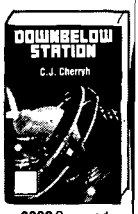

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